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JUNE

DIME DETECTIVE



DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



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of learning that there's ALL

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Name (please print)

Address

DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

Combined with
DETECTIVE FICTION MAGAZINE



Vol. 68

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No. 4

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By midnight, the Deacon's goons would trigger off—

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If Judy was the murderer, brother, I'd be her favorite corpse! <i>Copyright, 1945, Popular Publications, Inc.</i>		
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Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

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They claim this coupon brings you “good luck”



"Six months after mailing the coupon, I had a promotion and a big raise in pay!"

"From the moment I marked the coupon, my luck-changed!"



"My break came when I sent the coupon!"*

These statements are typical! I.C.S. gets letters like these regularly. Coupon senders report pay raises. Others win important promotions or new, interesting assignments. Still others find happiness, job security, opportunities never dreamed possible.



Is it LUCK? The results are so impressive, so quick in coming, that some say the I.C.S. coupon is "lucky." Of course, that's not true. The real reason for these amazing results is what happens to the person when he or she mails the coupon.

Coupon is first step! Naturally, you want to make good. But you've put off doing something about it. Mailing this coupon is *definite action!* It shows you're fed up with waiting for the breaks. You're determined to make your own breaks! And this determination alone accounts for much of the "luck" you'll start to experience.



You get free guidance! Within a few days you get the helpful and inspiring 36-page book, "How to Succeed." It's crammed with information. For example, it tells you in detail how to plan your career. Also how to prepare for advancement. In addition, you get a free catalog on the I.C.S. course that interests you. With your new-found determination and these two books as your guides, you're ready to cash in on your hidden abilities!

397 I.C.S. courses! You'll find a partial list of courses in the coupon below. Each course is up-to-date, extremely practical, completely success-tested. You study in your spare time. Set your own pace. Correspond directly with instructors. Cost is low. Diplomas are awarded to graduates. I.C.S. training rates high in all fields of business and industry. You won't find another school like it.

Call it being "lucky" or being "smart." Whatever it is, you're one step closer to your goal when you mail this famous coupon!

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS



BOX 3276-K, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, send me "HOW TO SUCCEED" and the booklet about the course BEFORE which I have checked.

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<input type="checkbox"/> Commercial Art	<input type="checkbox"/> Steam Fitting	<input type="checkbox"/> Mathematics	<input type="checkbox"/> Careers for Persons Over 40
<input type="checkbox"/> Magazine and Book Illustrating	<input type="checkbox"/> Air Conditioning	<input type="checkbox"/> Commercial	<input type="checkbox"/> STATIONARY ENGINEERING
<input type="checkbox"/> Clothing	<input type="checkbox"/> Linen	<input type="checkbox"/> Food Ingred.	<input type="checkbox"/> Fireman
<input type="checkbox"/> Show Card and Sign Lettering	<input type="checkbox"/> BUSINESS	<input type="checkbox"/> MECHANICAL AND SHOP	<input type="checkbox"/> Stationary Fireman
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<input type="checkbox"/> Auto Body Rebuilding and Refinishing	<input type="checkbox"/> Photography and Typing	<input type="checkbox"/> Reading Blueprints	<input type="checkbox"/> Electronics
<input type="checkbox"/> Diesel—Gas Engines	<input type="checkbox"/> Secretary	<input type="checkbox"/> Industrial Production	<input type="checkbox"/> Electrical Work
<input type="checkbox"/> Aeronautical Engineering Jr.	<input type="checkbox"/> Federal Tax	<input type="checkbox"/> Sensory Engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> RAILROAD
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<input type="checkbox"/> Aircraft Drafting	<input type="checkbox"/> Personnel and Labor Relations	<input type="checkbox"/> Aircraft Drafting	<input type="checkbox"/> Diesel Locomotives
<input type="checkbox"/> Auto Body Drafting	<input type="checkbox"/> Advertising	<input type="checkbox"/> Machine Design-Drafting	<input type="checkbox"/> Air Brake
<input type="checkbox"/> Architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> Retail Business Management	<input type="checkbox"/> Metal Drafting	<input type="checkbox"/> Car Inspector
<input type="checkbox"/> Arch. Drafting	<input type="checkbox"/> Managing Small Business	<input type="checkbox"/> Structural Drafting	<input type="checkbox"/> Trained Administrators
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<input type="checkbox"/> Carpentry and Mill Work	<input type="checkbox"/> Traffic Management	<input type="checkbox"/> Sheet Metal Work	<input type="checkbox"/> Textile Engineering
<input type="checkbox"/> Carpenter Foremen	<input type="checkbox"/> Chemical Engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> Electrical Drafting	<input type="checkbox"/> Optical Goods
<input type="checkbox"/> Reading Blueprints	<input type="checkbox"/> Analytical Chemistry	<input type="checkbox"/> Electric Power and Light	<input type="checkbox"/> Rayon Manufactura
<input type="checkbox"/> House Planning	<input type="checkbox"/> Petroleum—Not Gas	<input type="checkbox"/> LINEN	<input type="checkbox"/> Woolen Manufacture
<input type="checkbox"/> Framing	<input type="checkbox"/> Put-up Paper Making	<input type="checkbox"/> Plastics	<input type="checkbox"/> Loom Fixing
		<input type="checkbox"/> HIGH SCHOOL	<input type="checkbox"/> REFRIGERATION
		<input type="checkbox"/> High School Diploma	<input type="checkbox"/> POWER
			<input type="checkbox"/> Combustion Engineering
			<input type="checkbox"/> Diesel—Electric
			<input type="checkbox"/> Electric Light and Power
			<input type="checkbox"/> Tee Room Management

Name _____

Age _____

Home Address _____

City _____

State _____

Working Hours _____ A.M. to _____ P.M.

Occupation _____

Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces. Canadians residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada

READY for the RACKETS

A Department

Dear Detective Fans,

A great man once said: There's one born every minute. This month we have a batch of letters from readers who in one way or another woke up one morning to find themselves took. An old man once used to insist that, when you got took, the first time it wasn't your fault. But he also used to insist, if you got took a second time, it was your fault. These letters are from people who not only aren't going to be taken a second time, but who are going to help others from getting taken the first. Maybe they heard what another much greater man once said: You can fool some of the people some of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time.

You too can help the other fellow avoid being taken by writing down your experience with a racket and sending it to: The Rackets Editor, c/o DIME DETECTIVE, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. We'll pay you \$5 if we can use your letter, withholding your name if you request. Sorry we can't enter into correspondence regarding your letters, nor return them unless they are accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

Now for this month's letters:

Riders Wanted!

Dear Sirs:

We were planning a vacation to the South, my family and I, when we noticed an ad in the paper: "Wanted, riders going South Friday. Write Box X67." We answered the ad, and a few days later a personable young man appeared to discuss the terms of the trip. He explained his destination was very near ours and offered to take us there and back for only ten dollars a piece. There are four in our family, and we were to buy or carry our own lunch and go half on gas and oil for the car.

To show our good faith we paid five dollars each in advance, as he wanted to be sure we wouldn't change our minds about going with him. We were so elated at the bargain price that we didn't even ask to see his driver's license.

The upshot was that he gave us a phoney name and telephone number, and it was a blue Friday indeed when after packing bag and baggage we waited hopefully for over two hours before calling the telephone number he had given us.

Of course we complained, but to my knowledge he was never apprehended. I wonder how many five dollar bills he stole from poor people like us that week?

Mrs. E. Bertschinger
Trenton, Michigan

Spirit Food

Dear Editor:

I came to a cultural-spiritual meeting one Saturday evening, held in a place called the Biosophical Institute. It seemed to me that there was such an alive spirit there. An artistic looking lady with dark hair coiled exotically at the nape of her neck reviewed a book called "Wind, Sand, and Stars." Later, tea and cookies were served.

I was enthralled with the beauty of the experience. "Are all your meetings as wonderful as this?" I sighed. They assured me that they were and not only that: I, too, could develop my powers of self-expression, even as the lady reviewer I had so admired.

I enjoyed the meetings many times after that. One day it occurred to me that it cost money to rent a hall for the meetings, which were feeding me with so much "life and spirit," as my new friends called the companionship we furnished one another.

Delicately, I offered to join the organization, inquiring what were the dues. I was told there were no set dues in "biosophy" (the name of the cult) because what was given there was priceless. Didn't I admit that? Because the question was asked with such seeming sincerity, I offered to give \$5.00 per week.

But my new "friends" made me feel guilty to count out dollars in such a niggardly way. Soon I was giving \$50.00 a month for my "spiritual food." I paid for years, always feeling I should be giving more. I even borrowed money on my real estate, to help support the movement that was "nourishing" my soul.

One day I learned that the leader of the Group was living in the swankiest hotels. He travelled

(Continued on page 8)

COULD YOU SELL NYLONS AT 49¢?

Would you like to earn up to \$3 an hour for your spare time? **YOU CAN DO IT!** It makes no difference whether you are 18 or 80—whether you ever sold anything before or not—whether you have one hour or fifty hours a week to spare. You don't have to be a "salesman" or "saleswoman" because this isn't "selling"—it's more like giving something away. We'll establish you in your own business at our expense! You pay nothing—risk nothing!

Women buy over two million pairs of nylons every day. Most pay \$1.35 to \$1.95 the pair. Suppose you offered finest quality, nationally advertised nylons at 49¢ a pair, what woman would hesitate to order? Yet, that is all they cost if they run or snag within guarantee period up to **THREE WHOLE MONTHS!** This sensational low cost includes your commission, bonus and even postage.

There is nothing for you to buy or deliver. Nothing to learn or study. You can start making money one hour after receiving the free outfits. Just show the line—the amazing written guarantee of free replacement—display the free samples given to you and write orders. Could anything be easier?

We deliver and collect. You get cash in advance on every order you write and can easily earn the huge cash bonus that increases your earnings by 40%. You can never know how easy it is for you to get a steady extra income until you have the free, complete money-making Kendex outfit. Your ONLY cost is a stamp to mail the coupon. Send it today! You pay nothing now or later. Show the outfit to 5 women. That's all. When you see how eager women will be to give you orders, you'll thank your lucky stars that you answered this advertisement.

ADDITIONAL LINES FOR EXTRA CASH

The amazing hosiery lines, guaranteed against everything up to one full year are more than enough to give you a steady income, but you can triple this income with these additional lines:

GREETING CARDS

Could you sell beautiful all occasion cards, retail value 15c, for only 2½c each? You'll have a wonderful line from the world's largest manufacturer of greeting cards, including gift items, stationery, gift wrappings etc. You can just write orders. Company will deliver and collect. Coupon brings ALL outfits!

COSMETICS

Complete line of world acclaimed cosmetics for complexion loveliness, bathtime beauty and good grooming. A huge field that will give you a steady income. You can quickly become a beauty specialist. You don't have to buy or deliver anything. Just write orders!

KENDEX CORPORATION

BABYLON 19, N.Y.

Kendex Corporation Date.....
Babylon 19, N.Y.

Send me, free and prepaid, all money-making outfits and free samples. It is understood I am under no obligation and if I am not delighted, I may throw the outfits away.

Name

Address

City State

Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 6)

luxuriously throughout the year. I realized then that he was being supported in grand style by many dupes, one of whom was

Yours truly,

Bertha Zolun
Chicago, Illinois

The Night Club Swindler

Dear Sir:

In June 1949, my sister Carrie and I, desperately in need of a job, answered an ad in the classified section which read:

Wanted: twenty-five chorus girls for the New Top Hat Club. Age ranging from 21-26 years. Apply in person . . .

When we arrived at the address, we found eleven other girls besides ourselves had also come. A very handsome man of thirty years of age named Peterson said he was the manager and informed us that we had the necessary qualifications, but insisted that we sell five tickets each to our friends and relatives at the price of five dollars each or seven fifty for two. We agreed to this and gave him our address and telephone number.

After several days, he visited our residences, and we paid him in full—\$75! That was the last we heard from him. He disappeared into thin air, and we later discovered the New Top Hat Club never had existed at all.

Audrey Gilliam
Newport News, Virginia

English Lessons

Dear Sir:

I am a school teacher. Last summer I was attending the University of Buffalo to finish my graduate work. One day I was waiting for a bus on a corner when I happened to overhear two men arguing. The argument was quite simple. The one fellow said that the only way to spell the word that stood for a group of people singing together in a church was—CHOIR. The other man insisted that the word also could be spelled—QUIRE.

After a few heated remarks, the two men came over to me and one said, "You look as though you might be able to settle an argument we were having." He then went on to tell me what I had already overheard.

When he finished, I very emphatically said that quire was a term used to designate an amount of paper. There was no question in my mind about the word. I was especially sure since I taught English.

Naturally I became involved in the argument. At last the one bet the other \$10 that he was right. Then he turned to me and suggested that I get in on it also. So, hot-head that I am, I bet \$5.00.

We went to the public library which was near-by, consulted the dictionary, and, sure enough, QUIRE also meant a church singing group. Both of us paid up. I left figuring that \$5.00 a word is a steep price to pay for an education.

I walked down the street several blocks and went into a drug store for a coke. When I came out, whom did I see but the same two guys standing together in a crowd of people waiting for a bus.

That afternoon I followed them around while they pulled the same stunt on eight people—collecting from \$2.00 to \$20.00 on each bet.

Finally I got hold of a cop who listened to me, watched the pair, and then asked me if I would prefer charges against them. He warned me, however, that the charge was gambling. He went on to point out that I had committed the same offense. I just forgot about the whole thing.

The last thing I saw was the pair leading victim number nine to the public library.

Alan J. Ramm
Westfield, New York

Address Unknown

Dear Sir:

A map puzzle contest was advertised in our local paper, and, after I had worked the puzzle correctly, I decided to enter it. It was very easy—"just identify the names of the towns listed on the map, from these twelve letters of the alphabet . . ." The prize was \$250 cash. "Send no money," the ad read, "nothing to buy or sell."

Shortly after sending my reply, I received a letter informing me that I had "listed the highest number of towns possible" and was "in line to win \$250." But there was more "good news" for me. I had the opportunity to win \$3,500 if I sent in a donation toward the erection of a new church meeting house. Of course, I had to work another map puzzle. But things looked good to me, so I returned the puzzle and a donation of \$3.00. Now I would receive \$1,000 in addition to a promptness prize of \$1,000 if I won. The awards increased regularly with the size of the donation.

Next, I received a letter saying, "It appears you and some others are tied for the grand first prize and a tie-breaker puzzle will be sent to all before the prizes are awarded." Again I was urged to include a larger donation, since I would not receive the full \$3,500 unless I contributed \$12.

When I didn't add anymore to the building fund, I never heard from them again, nor did I receive the tie-breaker puzzle. I finally wrote a letter to them explaining everything and asking why I never received the final puzzle. My letter was returned unopened, marked "address unknown."

This contest was highly publicized at the time in newspapers and magazines, so I feel certain I wasn't the only one taken in. I realize most contests of this sort are legitimate, but this one certainly wasn't.

J. S.
Olympia, Washington

That's it for this time. But we'll be back in two months with more letters from folks Ready For the Rackets.

—The Editor.

Reducing Specialist Says:
LOSE WEIGHT

Where
It
Shows
Most

REDUCE

MOST ANY
PART OF
THE
BODY WITH



UNDERWRITERS
LABORATORY
APPROVED

**ELECTRIC
Spot Reducer**



PLUG IN—
GRASP
HANDLE
AND
APPLY

Take pounds off—keep slim and trim with Spot Reducer! Remarkable new invention which uses one of the most effective reducing methods employed by masseurs and furnish baths—MASSAGE!

Spot Reducer

Relaxing • Soothing
Penetrating Massage



FOR GREATEST BENEFIT IN
REDUCING by massage use
Spot REDUCER with or without
electric power. It can be used as
an aid in the relief of pain
for which massage is indicated.

TAKE OFF EXCESS WEIGHT!

**Don't Stay FAT—You Can Lose
POUNDS and INCHES SAFELY**

Without Risking
HEALTH

LIKE a magic wand, the "Spot Reducer" obeys your every wish. Most any part of your body where it is loose and flabby, wherever you have extra weight and inches, the "Spot Reducer" can aid you in acquiring a youthful, slender and graceful figure. The beauty of this scientifically designed Reducer is that the method is so simple and easy, the results quick, sure and harmless. No exercise or strict diets. No steambaths, drugs or laxatives.

With the SPOT REDUCER you can now enjoy the benefits of RELAXING, SOOTHING massage in the privacy of your own home! Simple to use—just plug the plug into an outlet and apply over any part of the abdomen, stomach, hips, chest, neck, shoulders, buttocks, etc. The relaxing, soothing massage breaks down FATTY TISSUES, tones the muscles and flesh, and the increased awakened blood circulation carries away waste fat—helps you regain and keep a firmer and more GRACEFUL FIGURE!

Your Own Private Masseur at Home

When you use the Spot Reducer, it's almost like having your own private masseur at home. It's fun reducing this way! It not only helps you reduce and keep slim—but also aids in the relief of those types of aches and pains—and tired nerves that can be helped by massage. Spot Reducer is a compact unit made of light weight aluminum and rubber and truly a beautiful invention you will be thankful you own. AC 110 Volts. Underwriters laboratory approved.

MAIL THIS 10 DAY FREE TRIAL COUPON NOW!

TRY THE SPOT REDUCER 10 DAYS FREE IN YOUR OWN HOME!

Mail this coupon with only \$1 for your Spot Reducer on approval. Pay postage \$3.95 plus delivery—or send \$9.95 (full price) and we shall postpaid prepay. Use it for ten days in your own home. Then if not delighted return. Spot Reducer is full price—no refund. Don't delay! You have nothing to lose—except ugly, embarrassing, undesirable pounds of FAT. MAIL COUPON now!

ALSO USE IT FOR ACHE AND PAINS



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LOSE WEIGHT OR NO CHARGE

**CASH
WALE'S
SECOND
MASSACRE!**

By
**PETER
PAIGE**



"All roads out of the city are blocked," Cash wrote. "Cops patrol bus, rail, and air terminals. Every fifteen minutes the radio bлаres our descriptions and warns the people to be on the watch for us, while the Sailor and I are holed up. We're a fine pair of clay pigeons for the first lugs who bust inside. . . ."

DEAR PETE: Junior was up to his Uncle Fred in his autobiography when the green Cadillac swept by for the third time. It first passed us going west about twenty miles the other side of Buffalo. Sailor Duffy had nudged my attention to it, the big stiff having a taste for Cads. I saw it again later in the after-

noon, when, as Junior waited for a signal change in a one-light town east of Buffalo, I sensed someone staring at the back of my neck.

I turned to find the green Cadillac parked behind us, with three men in front, two in the rear. When the light changed, the Cad sped past. Now it was back in time for



The .32 in his hand jumped, and she remained frozen in her posture of abandon, terror, hysteria, and shame. . . .

supper, a green flash roaring past us again.

This time my eyes swung with it, and I caught two faces peering back through its rear window at us.

Junior was saying, "So pop gets it all. Which kind of makes you laugh—huh, Charley?"

The Cad disappeared toward Buffalo, and I said, "Sorry, kid. I missed a beat."

He told it again and passed me a clipping from a pocket of his canary-colored jacket, and I became so interested that I forgot about the green Cadillac, which was my second mistake.

The first had been to board Junior's jalopy. But, after spending half a morning alongside the highway, with Sailor crouched on our bag far enough off the road not to terrify prospective Samaritans, Junior's jalopy looked roadworthy. And for once the sight of Sailor Duffy looming behind me failed to scare anybody. "Good gawd," he chanted reverently, "he a fighter?"—as if anything but leather gloves could have raised the lumps and bumps Sailor used for a face.

"Dugan," I lied. "Slugger Dugan. I used to manage him in the heavyweights. I'm Charley Wilson."

He kicked open the jalopy's door and passed a thin palm around. "Hank Dunhill—with a 'Junior' at the end when I wanna get fancy."

Sailor tossed our bag in back and grunted, "Meetcha!" with a grin that would jelly Dracula's knees. Junior took it manfully. We crowded in with him, and, after swapping a few amenities, the conversation settled down to his monologue—autobiographical, sad, and tedious—until he came to the clipping.

Junior was scrawny inside a black shirt under the canary jacket, with a red bandanna to set off his small, pinched features. His dark hair was long, combed straight back and oiled shiny, his grin sheepish and a fixture. He looked what he was: an exile from poolrooms and street corners.

"I was a kid when pop kicked Uncle Fred out," he said as I studied the clipping. "All I remember about it was the radio parts he left in the basement after pop booted him out of the house."

In the picture, Uncle Fred had a large-boned face with a sheepish grin that Junior had inherited. It was a full-page, two-column clipping from a San Antonio paper dated two weeks earlier. The headline was: HEIR TO A CITY! The heir wasn't Uncle Fred. But the city had been his—until a hundred pound crate of metal parts dropped off a shelf in the Dunhill Radar Factory and broke his neck.

"That Frederick Dunhill?" I gaped at Junior.

"Imagine how it hit me," he said, grinning, "when I read this and saw his picture and realized that all these Dunhill televisions and radios I've been seein' is none other than Uncle Fred! And with all his hellin' around, he never got married. So what he left goes to my pop, the guy who kicked him outta the house. Kinda funny—huh, Charley?"

"Pop" was Henry Dunhill, Senior, the "heir" of the headline. The picture of him showed him to be a balding gaffer with Junior's close-set eyes and a tight small mouth Junior would never own.

I WORKED up a smile for the son of the man who inherited a city. "It's bingo, kid. You're sitting pretty."

"But I gotta convince pop I reformed," Junior said worriedly. "Pop kicked me out about a year after mom died. Pop's so narrow he could hide behind a needle! Never smokes or drinks or uses dirty words like 'darn'. Always talkin' outta the Book. Worked as a bank teller twenty-seven years and was never absent—or even late—once. It says that in the clipping."

"I read it, kid."

He continued his life story.

"I was headin' straight for hell, he told me, and he wouldn't have me living under

his roof. Any time I reformed, he said, I'd be welcome home—just like that fatted-calf guy in the Book. I told him to drop dead. Then I walked out, figurin' I'd never see him again. Kind of comical how it turns out, huh, Charley?"

"You'll never make it," I said thoughtfully, brooding on the thirty-odd bucks standing between Sailor and me and starvation.

All of it was in the clipping, how Uncle Fred cooked up a couple of electronic gimmicks that became standard equipment in World War II and now his hole-in-the-wall radio shop in Pretty Falls (pop.: 756) grew into a dozen giant factories in Dunhill City (pop.: 178,000, and growing).

Aside from the plants, he owned most of the real estate, the radio and TV stations, the newspaper, a department store, office buildings, hotels, motels, apartment buildings—even two movie houses. That headline had it right the first time. What the falling crate knocked into pop's lap was Dunhill City itself!

"You have any ordinary clothes?" I said, looking at that canary yellow jacket of his.

"All the other stuff I got's work clothes."

"That's the ticket, kid. And the first barber shop we pass, you get that mop clipped crew—with a shampoo to delubricate it. Got a drink on board?"

"Sure." He reached for the dash compartment. I beat him to it, snagged a half-used pint of Black Label and heaved it into the ditch beside the road.

"Ditto for cigs, kid," I told Junior, whose moment of confusion had given way to understanding.

"You're pretty smart, Charley."

"I know some answers. When you stop to change into work clothes, we'll go over the rest of your gear—in case you're carrying other anti-reform items. Another thing; get hold of a Bible. Used. And now for the story—"

"What story, Charley?"

"How come a hell-bent guy like you sud-

denly reformed? What you've been up to since pop? You and the draft? That story." Junior's profile flushed; putting a sudden flush in my larceny. "Don't be a sap," I said. "If pop's a reformer—and you indicate he rates five stars—his biggest prize is the biggest sinner. The draft?"

"I'm no evader," he said softly.

"Of course not," I said. "Time?"

He nodded unhappily. "Two years in California—for molestin' a woman. Hell, I wasn't molestin' her. Her husband walked in two days early from the Navy. She began yellin' and hittin' at me and screamnin' how I'd snuck in the window. I got two years, but they let me go after one for good behavior. The draft wouldn't touch me after that. If pop ever finds out, I'm sunk."

"He'll find out, kid, because you'll tell him, because an outfit that size would have national detectives working for it, and someone in the organization will check back on you just to keep them busy. So pop's bound to find out. But hearing it from you first, together with how you decided his slant on life was correct after going the other way, he'll trot out that fatted calf you mentioned."

Junior's eyes abandoned the darkening road to sparkle at me. "You think he would, Charley?"

"Nothing makes a reformer happier than a dirty confession, kid. Play it straight, and you'll be wearing mink-lined underwear."

And Sailor and I would be wearing steak-lined stomachs. Pop might relish a repentant Junior, but he'd dread publicity, as would Junior for that matter once he got used to nightingale breast for breakfast. Not that I contemplated blackmail, just a brace of decent jobs for Junior's new found pals.

THAT was my program as we rolled through the night toward Dunhill city, pausing only for Junior's crew-cut and shampoo, a used pocket Bible, some new

blue work clothes, and, fuel for the jalopy and ourselves. That was my program, but the green Cadillac had one of its own.

It was parked broadside before the jalopy as we emerged from a roadside diner. Its spotlight trapped us in a cone of blinding light.

Two men closed in from the night, one growling, "Make him, Joe?"

Joe, a beetle-brow in grey tweeds, growled back, "It's him, Lieutenant."

"He says it's you," the Lieutenant, a sunken-eyed skyscraper in a navy pin-stripe, told Junior, walking up to the kid to pat his pockets, the undersides of his arms, his hips. He poked a finger the length of a fountain pen into Junior's feeble chest. "Let's go, Conroy. You led us a long chase, but it's all over now."

Junior scuttled back, his eyes jumping from side to side. "Conroy?" he yelled. "Whatsamatter with you guys? I'm no Conroy! I'm—hey!"

"Shaddup!" growled Two-ton, a bulldog faced bruiser in brown, who had come up from behind to greet Junior's ear with the flat of his palm.

A voice from the Cad said, "What about the other two guys, Lieutenant?"

"Boes," he said. "Isn't that right, Shorty?"

"We work when we can get it," I said.

"Sure," he nodded. "And hitch rides. And this time you hitched with a lamster from a murder rap. But you couldn't know that, so beat it. Head west. We don't like 'boes east."

I grinned up at him. "How do you know we don't know he's a lamster?"

The Lieutenant had difficulty breathing for a moment. Then he muttered thickly, "Okay, wise guy. We take all three of you. Let's go."

"Let's see your weight," I said, not moving. "Lieutenant of what?"

He tried to show me the weight of his right fist and then his left. Then he gaped at the blood spilling from the knuckles of

his hands and at my blood-flecked .32 cocked at his Adam's apple.

"Lieutenant of what?" I repeated gently, stepping forward to avoid the bulk of Two-ton dropping behind me from Sailor Duffy's sudden fistmanship.

The Lieutenant-of-What silently opened his mouth and flicked an agonized glance back toward the spotlight. I snapped a shot past his elbow, and the light went out. Out of the Cad's shadowy hulk, two shadowy figures spilled toward us.

Two more slugs abandoned my .32, knocking their hats off, and they dove behind the Cadillac without pausing to retrieve them.

I YANKED Junior's arm with my free hand. "Back the jalopy here, kid."

He scooted. Two-ton remained motionless on the ground behind me. Through the diner window I glimpsed the counterman waxing choleric on a wall telephone. A truck roared by on the highway, leaving a trail of sparks.

Sailor Duffy was grunting with pleasure. He was introducing beetle-browed Joe to the hook it took Jack Dempsey almost nine rounds to solve. But it was too dark for fistic niceties. Joe became a head-shaking thing on the ground crawling painfully toward the Cadillac.

"Some fun! Hagh?" Sailor grunted in my ear.

"Get with Junior," I said. "I've got this under control."

I waited for him to brush past me and said to the Lieutenant, "You're my control, Loot. Tell your pals how it is."

He told them in a hoarse plea, "Hold your fire, men! He's got me covered—"

I had him covered and into the jalopy's rear as Junior screeched it to a halt behind me. His buddies remained motionless and silent within the Cadillac's shadow.

They may have broken their silence when I powered a slug into the Cad's gas tank as we zoomed past it.

"Which way?" Junior said over his shoulder.

"Dunhill City, natch," I told him, snagging a baby cannon from my hostage's belt holster. "Try a side road. That guy in the diner was phoning the law. As for you," I said to our mute guest, "I'll ask you again. Lieutenant of what?"

He chose silence. I passed his automatic, a .45, from the heft of it, to Sailor Duffy on the front seat and told the big guy, if he even breathes hard, plug him."

"Hokay!" Sailor grunted.

I snagged a wallet from the mute's hip pocket and used my pen flash on its innards, exposing a gold-tinted badge and an identification card featuring picture and thumb prints, making him one Jack Norman, Lieutenant of Security Police at the Dunhill Radar Company.

I asked his brooding eyes, "What's with the Conroy hocus-pocus, Jack?"

He continued to choose silence.

I tapped Junior's shoulder. "Kid, you got papers?"

"Sure, Charley."

He passed me his wallet. I held the papers so the Lieutenant could see the name repeated among them.

"Your boss's son," I told him. "Nobody named Conroy. Henry Dunhill, Junior, son of Henry Dunhill, Senior. What does that make you?"

It made him mute.

I dug through the rest of his wallet and came up with a snapshot showing Junior on a small lawn, smirking beside a stout, tired-faced, gray-haired woman. I put my flash on it, held it alongside the wheel for Junior's inspection.

"Hey! That's mom!"

"When?"

"About five years back, Charley. Just before she died."

"Stop along here somewhere, kid."

We had been winding along a two-lane blacktop entirely free of traffic. Now Junior brought us to a halt alongside a vacant field

and turned to view Lieutenant Norman's sunken-eyed face in the halo of my flash.

"I never saw him before," Junior said.

"Who took the picture?"

"Pop."

That figured. Nothing else did. Pop had nothing to fear from a returning black sheep. All he had to say was, "Scram!" Someone else, then.

"Who else in Dunhill City do you know, kid?"

"Nobody, Charley. And pop couldn't have known anybody there either. He used to brag he never went more'n fifty miles past the city limits in his whole life—and he never even got a letter from Uncle Fred."

"What city?"

"Chi. Didn't I tell you that's where I'm from?"

MY FLASH was still on Lieutenant Norman's cadaverous face. Only his pistol-whipped fingers moved, twitching on his navy pin-stripe knees. They grew motionless as the rest of him when I flicked my .32's muzzle through his lips.

"Open 'em, Jack. What's it about?"

A trickle of scarlet ran down his chin. His Adam's apple rose and fell slowly. He became corpse-like again. I turned to Junior.

"How about your stepmother, kid?"

"My what?" he yelped.

"It's what the clipping says." I passed it over and he stooped to read by the dash light the clipping's final sentence: . . . *Mr. and Mrs. Dunhill will arrive at the scene of his fabulous inheritance next Tuesday.*

"I'll be damned!" Junior breathed. "I musta read it a hundred times, and I never noticed that!"

"It can't be your mom, kid. You told me she died."

"Five years ago," he mumbled through his daze.

"And you left pop four years ago. So this is someone he either knew all along

or met since then. You got any ideas?"

"Charley, pop *hates* dames!"

"That's who fall hardest. He know you're coming?"

"I wrote him from San Antone last week."

"Saying what?"

"Just that I'm comin'. I'd be there sometime today or tomorrow. I'm pushin' my Chevvie up through Buffalo. Stuff like that."

"It's enough," I said. "Someone else saw your letter." I waved my .32 gently under Lieutenant Norman's eyes. "You, for instance. Hey, Loot?"

His eyes moved with the swaying muzzle. His bleeding lips stayed shut. They stayed shut during the next few minutes as my .32 slammed his jaw east and west, put welts in his brows, cracked his fingers each time they grabbed at my flicking weapon.

"Let's hit the road," I finally told Junior's ashen features.

"I can't figure it," the kid mumbled thickly. "He musta wanted me real bad to stay clammed through all that. Sure, I've had arguments with guys here and there—"

"This wasn't personal," I told him quietly. "This was from someone close to your pop who didn't want another knife slicing into your pop's pie, someone close enough to read your letter and know you'd be coming this way today in a beat-up car."

"My,"—the word came awkwardly,— "stepmother?"

"Maybe. Maybe someone your pop inherited from Uncle Fred. We'll take the Loot to your pop and see how he figures it. By now he probably has the local law in his hip pocket. They'll have someone who might figure out why the Loot wants you dead."

"D-d-dead?" Junior falsettoed.

"What else?" I shrugged. "That's the only way you could be kept from a hunk of the pie. They probably had you slated to end in a deep hole, or under a river wearing cement overshoes."

"But you stopped 'em!" Junior breathed. "Shootin' their hats off in the dark. I never heard of shootin' like that before."

"You were seeing the best," I told him gently, forsaking modesty to impress upon him the advisability of not Welching when it came time for him to pick up our tab.

"And Slugger's punchin'—"

"I take Marciano in two rounds," Sailor said briefly.

"Let's roll, kid," I said.

And we rolled. Lieutenant Jack Norman didn't mind. He was in a world of his own from too much of my .32's muzzle behind his ear—which was my third mistake.

I should have left him somewhere in a ditch. Dead.

CHAPTER TWO

Blood in the Alley

IFIND this hard to write, Pete. Shock is fading from the bullet hole in my thigh, giving way to *ouch*—which isn't bad in itself, because *ouch* keeps me awake. But it distracts me from these scribbles as well, and the scribbling is half my reason for staying awake.

All roads out of Dunhill City are blocked. Cops patrol bus, rail, and air terminals. Every fifteen minutes the radio broadcasts our description and warns the citizenry to look out for the Sailor and me, not for the Slugger Dugan and Charles Wilson we were until a few hours ago but for Sailor Duffy and Cash Wale.

We're in a sort of glass, green-tinted penthouse atop a building in the heart of town. Fortunately there's a letter chute that drops to a mailbox in the lobby five floors below, the route by which I intend these scribbles to escape.

Our way out, as things stand, has to be up. I'll get to that later. It's a forced gamble, but the .32 at my elbow gives us the odds.

In case I'm interrupted before setting

down the pay-off, that's already in a stamped envelope addressed to you. I slide each scribble-covered sheet into a bigger envelope, also addressed to you, and wearing enough postage to insure delivery.

At my other elbow a table-model Dunhill is disgorging a golden-voiced newscast, mainly about us, mainly junk. You'll be hearing it along with your breakfast an hour or so from now, you and the other ants under the Big Skyline a few hundred miles south and east of here.

Ironic, isn't it? Golden Voice raves about that "homicidal maniac, Cash Wale," and I'm the only person with a finger out of the pie who knows the truth! And it's a dilly, Pete. Even Junior's pop doesn't know they've stolen Dunhill City right out from under him, lock, stock, and barrel!

As for the drivel Golden Voice spews, I didn't launch what he calls, "The Second Cash Wale Massacre." Up to this point, all I had committed was mistakes.

You know of three: hitching a ride with Junior, forgetting the green Cadillac, failing to eliminate Lieutenant Jack Norman permanently. But these were pardonable. It would have taken clairvoyance to anticipate that any one of these was an error.

The fourth was something else again, made after we parked in the darkness across from an all-night lunch wagon on the sorrier edge of Dunhill City.

Midnight was a bit behind us. A bone-chilling wind swooped down from the north. The only sign of life on that barren street was an all-night chef fussing with a silvery coffee urn behind plate-glass windows. Only those windows were lit, a beacon in a block of darkened taxpayers, and, two blocks nearer the heart of Dunhill City, a green neon sign—PALACE COURTS—swayed in the wind. Bedded behind all those darkened windows were the unexpected people: the readers of true crime mags, the glancers at post office and police station circulars: the unexpected people who bump into you around a sud-

den corner and remember your face from under a five-year-old headline.

You know how it's been the five years Sailor and I have been running. I've written from time to time, and later read it under your hy-line in Dime Detective, with the names and locations changed. You know how we've bumped into the unexpected people, winding up with our fake identities gone and brand new headlines screaming about Cash Wale and Sailor Duffy. Like Golden Voice on the radio now.

But you can't know how it's been in the days following, when even entering a grocery was a life and death venture, when every road seemed to lead from a frying pan toward a fire.

Now, after five long years I was back in New York State, with the prospect of walking into a cop headquarters with a goon I'd pistol-whipped and a tale involving a rod I had no permit to carry. I might as well have walked into Sing Sing and told them, "I give up, fellas. Brush off the Squat."

On the other hand, there's security. Talk about a man's hunger for grub, or dames, or dough. Peanuts! Roll those hungers into one big lump, double it, and you'll have an idea how Sailor and I yearned to retire under fake identities that would stick. This yen for a taste of solid security had grown through the years of our running until Sailor and I talked of little else all day, dreamed of nothing else at night. And here, in this city owned by Junior's pop, it was so close I could taste it!

SO I chucked caution and when Junior asked, "We take him to the cops, Charley?" launched my fourth mistake, telling him, "Not the cops, kid. Not right away. Your pop's in high finance now, and what's behind the Loot may be something he'd want to handle delicately. But let's first see how you rate with pop. Oke?"

"How'll I find him this time of the night, Charley?"

"That beanery may have a phone. And kid—" I called as Junior began sliding from under the wheel, "I wouldn't complicate your homecoming. Save the Loot, us, and the shooting for when you see him face to face."

"Oke!" Junior nodded. He crossed the wind-swept street to the lunchwagon, and Sailor turned his ice-chip eyes to me:

"A good kid, hagh, Ca—I mean, Charley?"

"He may be our answer, pally," I told the big guy softly. "We play our cards right, and it'll be an end to the running. A home. Three squares a day. All the comic books you can read. How's it listen?" Before his grin tore his face apart, I added grimly, "You know what your part of playing our cards right is, don't you, pal?"

"Yeah! Sure!" he nodded eagerly. "Keep my big, fat mout' shut! Hagh, Ca—I mean, Charley?"

"Charley!" I yelled at him.

"Hokay! I got it! Charley. Hokay?"

"Hokay," I sighed.

Junior slid back to his seat behind a wide grin. "In like Fynn, Charley. Someone's comin' down for me."

"Your pop?"

"No. She said he was over the radar factory. But she sounded real glad I was here. Said they'd been expectin' me. Sounds good, huh? Call me Susan, she says. *My stepmother!*"

"Well, just leave us out of it until you're sure you pack some weight. Tell him you wrestled the Loot's cannon away and clobbered him with it. I don't think the Loot will argue. If he does, your word should pack more weight." I pointed to the neon—PALACE COURTS—two blocks away. "We'll be there. I'm going to sign us in now, but Slugger will stick around until you make a connection. Just in case."

Slugger passed the .45 to the kid, and I hefted our bag into the wind. Occasional clouts behind the ear had kept Lieutenant

Norman comatose. And so I told Sailor to wait in the doorway of a darkened pharmacy. "In case the Loot snaps out of it too quick," I explained to the kid. And, to Sailor, "You see trouble, stop it. Anything else, stick here until I get back. Oke?"

"Charley," Junior said, "I bet my pop could put you guys up."

"After you're settled," I grinned at him.

He gave me his hand, then I picked up our bag, and started down the dismal street, leaving Junior in his Chevvie with its comatose cargo and Sailor in the drug store doorway with his instructions.

PALACE COURTS turned out to be a dozen weather-beaten shacks forming a shallow arc behind a combination filling-station-store-office—all of it in darkness except a small bulb over a pushbutton and sign: *Ring for Service*.

Service turned out to be about two hundred pounds of sleepy-eyed kewpie doll. Curlers glinted from her pink hair. Fluffy mules held her surprisingly small feet. A faded blue robe encased her even more surprising proportions. But all in all she was more than easy on the eyes.

A few minutes later she opened the door of Cottage Seven, flicked on a light, and said, "It ain't the Waldorf, honey. But who gets in the Waldorf for two-fifty a night?"

"For two of us?" I said. "My buddy's waiting for me up at the beanery. He's a fighter. A heavyweight."

For two it'll be three-fifty. No cookin', and if you get too lonesome, go to her house. Old Marvin'd—"

"Someone I should know?"

"Police chief. Mind if I come in and set?" I waved a hospitable palm, and she moved in to creak one of the two cots. She yanked her robe back down over dimpled knees and said, "Honey, you never seen such a change as came over this town since Mister Fred got killed. We used to keep these cabins filled every night—sometimes two and three times the same night—and

never a nose poked in. Now—" She unloaded a sigh that creaked the cot.

"Marvin clamped down, huh?"

"It ain't his fault." Mister Henry—that's Mister Fred's brother—treats the whole town like a Sunday school. Marvin's gotta play along—or else.' You lookin' for work?"

"That's right."

"You'll get it. Soon as the bars began gettin' inspected outta business, the single fellas began driftin'. All you see in the paper these days is help wanteds."

"But they liked Mister Fred."

SHE closed the widening gap in her robe and emitted a lowdown chuckle. "Who wouldn't! He even gave me a ride once in his helicopter. Why, I remember—"

"I'll get Slugger," I cut in hastily, stemming the flow.

"Now that I'm 'woke, it'll be a while before I can sleep again. And I've a softness for fighters. My husband is one. Resin-back Howard. You could play a fiddle with his back after the first round, any first round."

"He won't be jealous of Slugger?"

"He ain't here. It got so he spent more time in the radar factory where he works than with me. So I kicked him out. Your buddy got a girl?"

"We're strangers here," I said.

She handed the grin back to me. "I'm Lily Howard, honey. Folks'll tell you I go in for plain talk and direct action. Things are gettin' awful monotonous. Who'd you say you was?"

"Charley Wilson. My buddy's Sam Dugan—'Slugger', when he was with the heavyweights."

"Bring him over, Charley. I'll wait."

I left her in the cottage with our bag and a fin and walked the two long blocks back to the jalopy still parked across from the all-night diner. Somewhere in the night behind me a siren was trying to reach a star.

Junior seemed to be catnapping behind the wheel. The pharmacy doorway was empty. So was the jalopy's rear. The only other person on that darkened street was the all-night chef crossing toward me as I extended a hand to arouse Junior.

"I wouldn't touch him, Bud!" the chef sang out.

He could have spared his lungs. My hand had paused an inch from Junior's shoulder. The chef paused at my elbow. "I called the cops and an ambulance," he said. "You a friend of his?"

My face was close enough to Junior's to smell his blood. My pocket flash illuminated it: a scarlet mask glistening from his brand new crew-cut to his chin—and dripping through the wheel to his thighs. Red bubbles kept forming and collapsing before his lips.

A second siren got into a game of leap-frog with the first.

"I heard the shot!" the chef blurted. "Half scared me to death! I came runnin' out and saw the guy."

My flash swung to the spider-web pattern around the small hole in the windshield, then dipped to the seat on both sides of Junior, then to the floorboards around his feet, then to the jalopy's rear.

The .45 I had left him with was gone. It couldn't have left that small a hole in the windshield anyhow. But it was gone, and so was Lieutenant Jack Norman, and Sailor Duffy.

The leapfrogging sirens chased each other toward us. I gaped at the chef.

"You saw what guy?"

"Runnin' right at me as I came outta my place. Yellin' 'Hey, you!' with a voice like a foghorn. I thought for a second he meant me. But he ran right past—so close, I coulda touched him! A big guy. Bald as an egg. With a beat-up face like a pug. He musta been scared that I seen him, 'cause the next thing I knew, he was duckin' into that alley."

"That alley?" croaked out of me. I

pointed to the only one in sight, a narrow slot between a darkened grocery and the darkened tailor shop next to the lunch wagon.

His bug-eyed nod sent me loping, ignoring his yell to come back. I could hear a third siren now sobbing distantly after the first two. I turned my flash and feet into the alley and promptly lost both over an already toppled garbage can, found my flash again, and turned it on the mess that had toppled me, a dark red wetness, with the skidmark of my shoe slicing down its center.

IT WAS a pool of blood. Giant hand prints flanked it, and knee prints cut arcs into its street side. Which added up to a picture of Sailor Duffy on his hands and knees shaking blood from his head after the ambush. Sailor hadn't been fleeing the chef's scrutiny. The big lamebrain had been after whoever shot Junior. What did it matter that the shooter was armed? Didn't Sailor still wear the fists that almost stopped Dempsey? So he chased the shooter into this murky slot where the shooter paused to ambush him. But not with a slug. The chef would have mentioned a second shot. With something hard and blunt. And the big lamebrain blundered into *wham*, leaving him on his hands and knees spilling blood from his already punch-lumped head.

I flicked my flash along the pale cement walls flanking the alley. There were large hand prints spaced along them, fading as they progressed. I followed them through the alley and emerged in a weed-covered backyard surrounded by silent darkness.

From behind, all three sirens seemed to be drilling into my spine.

Beyond a clapboard fence was a backyard full of clothes lines full of clothes. On both sides of me, running the length of the block both ways, were more backyards, but nothing seemed to be stirring in any of them.

I was trying to decide which way to turn when my shadow sprang to life ahead of me.

"Hey, *you!*" a voice yelled hoarsely from the street. "Come out here!"

I didn't want to come. I wanted to pick a direction and get to Sailor before he lost too much blood and dropped, or before he caught up with the shooter a second time, or before a phantom gong sounded between his ears to send him shuffling down a main drag flicking hooks and jabs at the invisible shadows of his fistic yesteryears.

But I didn't want some trigger-happy cop to put a slug in my back for running, either. I came out, squinting into the brilliant glare of a radio car spotlight.

A second radio car was parked ahead of the first. Rubbernecks had appeared from nowhere to collect around the jalopy. Now only one siren wailed in the night.

I walked toward the carelessly-held revolver of a hot-eyed patrolman. Behind him the scrawny chef was saying, "Not him, Riley. A *big* man."

"You see a *big* man?" Riley jiggled his weapon at me.

"Just some blood in the alley."

From the crowd around the jalopy a fat man dressed in brown called, "Ask him if he's Charley!"

"I'm Charley," I said.

The crowd parted to admit us to the fat man's side at Junior's side. Someone had brought Junior's head to the back of his seat and wiped enough blood from his face to expose the purple dot over his temple where the slug entered.

His glazed eyes toured the rims of their sockets slowly. He was mumbling, "Wanna talk with Charley, gotta see Charley—Charley—"

I obeyed the fat man's gesture and leaned toward the boy, feeling the fat man's fat against my spine and his warm breath on my ear.

"Here, kid—"

"My head hurts like crazy, Charley."

I turned to stare two inches into the fat man's intent eyes. He muttered, "Ambulance comin'. I'm Chief Marvin. Keep him talkin'." He turned to a uniformed sergeant who had come up behind him. "What is it, Fogarty?"

"Blood in that alley." Fogarty pointed. "Schultz says he was shot sittin' in the car," Marvin scowled.

"And a big fella did it," Fogarty nodded. "And the kid couldn't have lost that much blood and get back here. I'm just tellin' you how it looks. I'm puttin' print men on the alley and broadcastin' an alarm for a big, bald guy with a broken up face."

"Do that," Marvin muttered impatiently. He turned back to the chalky mask I was probably using for a face. I hastily swung it to Junior, who was plucking weakly at my lapel.

"Charley?"

"Still here, kid."

"I think you was right."

"About what, kid?"

"*You* know...." His voice faded into silence.

HE WENT in for deep breathing. Eyes closed swallowed his glazed stare. His fingers slid from my lapel. A crimson bubble formed at his lips, grew to the size of a golf ball, collapsed, remained collapsed.

Dead? I didn't know, didn't think of him. All my thoughts were racing through the night after Sailor Duffy. What would it matter that investigation would show he didn't shoot Junior? They'd take his fingerprints before that, and then whether or not he plugged Junior would become strictly academic.

It would all come out, dating from the time he muscled the guy who was trying to muscle me out of a breadline and we became a team, he on his uppers from too many left hooks, me unemployed when Repeal ended the usefulness of my rod to Bootleg Bigs.

All of it would be back in headlines:

how we made the slow climb back together as the Cash Wale Investigation Service, until what the papers called The Cash Wale Massacre started us running. What did it matter that we were framed into that from scratch? All the witnesses were dead.—including the framer, and it was our word against the evidence, and our word was mud.

Nothing would matter but the new headlines screaming from coast to coast: DUFFY CAPTURED! After that, just a matter of routine to the final headline: DUFFY DIES IN CHAIR!

I gradually became aware of Chief Marvin's fat palm on my shoulder and his voice almost fatherly, "Don't let it hit you too hard, Charley. Doc says there's still a chance."

"Doc?" I croaked.

He gestured at the interne jabbing a hypodermic into Junior's bared chest, and I realized the night was finally free of sirens. An ambulance stood backed to the jalopy. The interne opened the door alongside Junior and motioned two attendants with a stretcher to bring it over.

"He's still alive," the interne told Marvin as the attendants swung Junior to the stretcher, "technically."

Marvin watched him trail the stretcher to the ambulance, then fed me his intent gaze. "Pretty good friend of yours, hey?"

"Yeah," I said softly.

"Wouldn't talk to us; just asked for 'Charley'. Good thing you were around. What did he mean, saying you were right?"

"I don't know," I shook my head. "Shot in the head like that—no telling what was on his mind."

Marvin nodded as if this was reasonable. "Papers we found on him," he said, "make him one Henry Dunhill."

"That's right. With a 'Junior' at the end."

"Any kin to Senior?"

"Son."

"I'll be damned!" Marvin breathed, off

balance for a moment, but only for a moment. He came back to his original tack: "He said it was something you'd know about, Charley."

"Maybe," I shrugged. "We've talked about this and that. I can tell you what we talked about."

"What was the other man's name?"

"What other man?"

"Night man in that lunch wagon says there was a big guy."

"Said the same to me. I went where he said he saw him go, but I didn't see anything."

"How about where you were when the boy was shot?"

"I was taking a walk."

"Why?"

I shrugged. "Junior wasn't sure how he'd be received. I didn't want to queer his pitch, so I got out of the way when he told me someone was coming down for him."

"Anybody see you?"

"Just the chef when I got back."

Marvin spent a few moments trying to pick my brains apart with his eyes. Then he patted my shoulder with a soft hand. "Let's go, Charley."

"Where?" I breathed, not moving.

"Hospital. They may snap the boy out of it long enough for him to tell you somethin' else."

We went in a prow car, wedged three deep, its siren screaming and a red spot blazing. Junior was on an operating table by the time we arrived.

CHAPTER THREE

Close Friend

THREE hours later Junior hadn't talked to me, or anyone. He lay in a coma, his skull minus a .28 caliber slug, still alive only because of the slug's lightness and the wide angle of its impact.

I worried about him, but worried more that three hours of city-wide manhunt had

failed to net Sailor Duffy. The big lame-brain didn't have enough sense to lie doggo. I began to imagine him unconscious in some alley, helpless in face of the approaching dawn and certain discovery.

After three hours of helter-skelter Chief Marvin finally got back to me. But his first query ran into a cranky, "Enough of that! This is my son's friend, not a suspect! If Charles recalls anything else, he will tell me, and I you. I will not have him badgered now? Understood?"

Marvin nodded, and Henry Dunhill, Senior, turned to the surgeon, still in his operating garb: "When can I take my boy home?"

The surgeon spread helpless palms. "It's no longer in my hands."

"In the Lord's!" the lord of Dunhill City murmured solemnly. His jaw popped forward. "But I want him home, tended by his loved ones as soon as possible! Understood?"

"Certainly, Mr. Dunhill."

"You better understand it!" Mister Dunhill growled, then touched my arm and softened his voice. "Come, Charles. You must be weary."

Stepping outside, I discovered I did feel weary at that, and baffled by the cocky, take-charge guy Junior's pop turned out to be. Nothing at all like the pious Mr. Meek Junior had led me to expect.

He looked more like Junior than his picture in the clipping indicated. Glasses, baldness, greyness and wrinkles made a difference, of course. And his mouth was tighter than Junior's was.

But what baffled me most was his original greeting when Marvin introduced me. He extended a palm, bobbed his cranky-looking face, and snapped, "Been a long time since Chicago; hasn't it, Charles?"

Taking his palm, I'd mumbled that it had, wondering if he thought he knew me, mistook me for someone else, or what?

Now I followed him down the hospital steps to a '53 Buick parked at the curb.

He touched my arm, raised his voice over the wind. "You drive, Charles?" I nodded. He nodded back, "Drive, then. Night traffic makes me nervous. Had a man, Norman, driving me. Can't understand why he didn't report this evening."

His muttering sailed away in the wind as we entered his Buick from opposite sides. He pointed north when we were seated. "That way, Charles. Should have notified me. I'll need a new helicopter pilot if he quit for good. Don't suppose you ever flew a helicopter, Charles?"

I said, "No," gliding us away from the curb and wondering how many Normans would be floating around Dunhill City.

"Shame!" he muttered peevishly. "Can't stand irregularity. Spent twenty seven years in a bank. Never wasted even one minute through tardiness or absence. Norman will have to go. Unreliable once—a precedent is set. And yet—yet—if he was only here now when I need him most! That Marvin! Incompetent old fool! Intended grooming Norman for the post. Done a better job finding the blackguard who shot my boy. Charles?"

"Huh?"

He dropped his hand on my knee. "Have you any idea at all? You know the boy. Why should anyone want to attack him?"

We were gliding through the heart of town now, past the Dunhill Hotel, the Dunhill Loew's, the Dunhill Department Store, the Dunhill Building. I hesitated whether to fat the fire now or later, temporized with, "This Norman connected with security in your radar plant?"

The old head bobbed. "Made him lieutenant of the night shift. Raised him from the ranks. Teetotaler. Non-smoker. Quiet, competent man. Learned to pilot a helicopter in the Navy. I trusted him implicitly—until tonight. Why?"

I took a deep breath and told him. I omitted Sailor's participation and my shooting. I said that Junior and I had wrestled Norman's .45 free and Norman into the

jalousy, mentioned the snapshot and Norman's silence and that before the shooting I had left Norman comatose and Junior armed with the .45.

When I concluded, all he could mutter was, "Fantastic! Utterly fantastic! Make a right turn here."

I SWUNG the Buick east. We rode between row after row of squat cottages huddled in the darkness. I glanced sideways to meet the pale blobs of his glasses before the shadow of his face.

"Why didn't you tell this to Marvin?" he asked quietly.

"A good reason," I said. "Why should anyone want to kill the hoy? He was a stranger here; so it couldn't be personal. The only motive I could figure was money—through you. Which led to several possibilities, mainly those of inheritance. Someone close to you—possibly Norman himself—might have plans to become your heir. Eliminating your son would be a logical step toward that. Whatever it was, I thought it might involve matters you wouldn't want broadcast."

"Why?" he cut in.

"The newspapers, if they got hold of it, might smear someone close to you who was innocent. Or if it is a plot, premature publicity might scare the plotters into covering their tracks before you got a line on them. In either case, I thought you should be the one to decide how to handle it."

I left it there, with his head bobbing up and down in agreement. "Yes, yes!" he murmured. "Of course! You did wisely, Charles. It could be—" He dismissed his impending thought with a brusque gesture, muttered, "At the bottom of it, my greed! Should have spurned the blood money—turn left at the next intersection."

I swung us to a blacktop winding away from town and listened to a muttered monologue about how money netted from bombsights, radar, and proximity fuses was tainted by the blood of boys killed in bat-

tle, how Junior was suffering for the sin of his father.

"Oh, I rationalized!" he clutched my arm with bony fingers. "Told myself it wasn't greed, but a means to finance the Lord's work. As if He could be deceived! And now? My son at the very brink! Norman—a viper in my bosom! The Lord in His mysterious ways—"

The old man's muttering ways brought us, finally, through a wrought-iron archway, up a long curve of crushed shell driveway to a colonial-type structure only slightly smaller than the White House.

The trilling of a phone detoured us into the library, where he picked up an ivory-hued instrument and motioned me to a red leather armchair and barked, "Dunhill! Yes? Who? I'll call you back."

He pronged the phone and showed me his teeth. "Mrs. Dunhill will prepare your room, Charles. We're simple people. Don't keep servants here nights. Can't stand their snooping, prying ways. Think warm milk will help you sleep?" And, without pausing for my reply, he left the room, calling back over his shoulder, "Wait, Charles."

I stared back at assorted deer heads staring glassily down at me and listened to him mount the circular stairway I had seen in the circular foyer. A door opened upstairs. I could hear him mumble. A woman's voice replied, rising from sleepiness to anger. The slamming door blotted it.

Instinct sent me to the ivory phone. I got it to my ear in time to hear a man say,—"Or not significant. State Police reported a shooting at Seymore, a crossroad about thirty miles west of here. No victims. The complainer, owner of a roadside restaurant, described one participant close enough to be your son. Another resembled this Charles Wilson—you asked us to investigate."

"What else?" the old man's voice barked. "A green Cadillac was abandoned at

the scene. It had stolen license plates and a bullet hole in its gas tank. There've been no arrests."

"They trace the Cadillac?"

"Not yet. Want us to stick with it?"

"Discreetly, Conners."

"Naturally, Mister Dunhill. Your brother never had cause to worry on that account; nor will you. How far back do you want us to trace your boy?"

"Until the time he left our home."

"And this Wilson?"

"Everything you can learn about him, Conners."

Their dialogue drifted off into a pair of goodnights. I had my finger cocked to break the connection the instant one of them did, and I did.

THE old man brought a chair around to face me, brought two glasses of milk off a tray, and handed me one. "I've been meaning to ask you, Charles — we've a little time until Susan prepares your room—how long have you known my boy?"

"About a year," I lied, deciding Junior wouldn't be able to contradict me before I flew the coop. And as soon as I collected the Sailor, flying the coop was the program what with a national detective agency digging into my yesterdays. All I wanted now was out.

"Not from Chicago, then?" the old man murmured.

I shook my head and he permitted himself a dry chuckle. "I couldn't have known, y'see. He never brought his friends to the house—one of our bitterest points of contention—and I had assumed—"

He broke off to sip his milk, eyeing me benevolently over the rim and nodding to himself. "About Norman," he finally said, setting down his glass. "I admire your discretion. Proper thing would have been to tell Marvin, of course. But—" his palm fluttered—"it's delicate. Delicate, Charles. Your surmise—the possibility of someone close to me—" He tapped my knee with a

bony finger, leaned close, and whispered, "*Keep your eyes open, Charles! I'll want your impressions! Y'know?"*

"People close to you?" I asked softly.

His finger jabbed my knee hard. "*All of them! Regardless of—uh—sex!*"

I matched his next sip of warm milk and decided the old boy's marbles were in tip-top order, the underestimation of the year, as it turned out.

The rest of our conversation involved his queries and my lies about Junior, until a throaty, "*Hen-ree!*" from above brought him to his feet. "Come, Charles. Susan must have your room prepared—"

She did. But I wasn't prepared for Susan. I had anticipated a grandmotherly type, not the slender young brunette patting my pillow into shape.

"Is this Charles, dear?" Her voice was low-pitched, expressionless, her delicately tapering features somewhere between pretty and beautiful. The gaffer waved a hand between us.

"Yes, m'dear. Charles. Mrs. Dunhill."

We swapped nods. For a moment I thought she was blind. There was focus in her large, widely-spaced, purple eyes. She looked as if her expression had frozen while she was trying to recall the words of a song. But she wasn't blind. Her eyes dropped vaguely to his wrist as the old man checked the time and muttered, "Want-ed to stay, but I can't. More trouble. More radar again."

"Yes, dear," she murmured, raising her dazed eyes to his cranky scowl.

"Strange, isn't it?" he went on. "Nothing goes wrong with my other properties. Only the war plants! Government men babble of spies, saboteurs. I know better. The Lord's displeasure—" He broke off as a horn sounded twice from below. "Well,"—he bobbed a smile at each of us—"make yourself at home, Charles. Anything you need and don't see, I'm sure Susan will be happy to—" He leaned over to peck her motionless cheek.

"Night, m'dear."

We listened to his descent of the circular stairway, then to the front door slamming.

Susan Dunhill moved gracefully to the window and fingered aside a lace curtain. When the vehicle's sound faded into the night wind, she let the curtain drop and turned to ask me expressionlessly, "Got a butt, Shorty? I'm simply dying for a smoke."

My expression brought a faint smile to her lips. "Butts. Cigs. Fags," she said patiently, as if I were a foreigner and she was trying to discover my language.

"No," I said finally.

"You threw them away," she shrugged. "And probably swallowed chlorophyll to kill that whisky breath. But it won't do you any good, Shorty. Or that punk in the hospital. Or me, if you haven't caught the pitch yet. None of us will get a dime. It's all going to heaven, every last nickel of it." Her unfocused eyes made a swift inventory of my person. Her next crack had my hackles on end. "How come the gat under your belt, Shorty?"

"Baby," I breathed, "you flabber my gast!"

"Suzy. I've run into gunsels before. In Chi. Even if you didn't have 'killer' written all over your face, that bulge under your jacket isn't baby fat. And they said there'd be fancy shooting."

"Not me, baby."

"Suzy."

"Okay, Suzy. Not me. Someone else shot—"

"Junior?" She was amused. "I'm talking about Norman and his clucks. Want to argue?"

"No, but—"

"What, then?"

"I want to ask."

SHE made herself comfortable at the head of the bed, bunching the pillow under her arm. One long leg crossed the other

on the snowy sheet. The pink pumps she'd been wearing remained on the carpet. Her toenails looked as if she had tiptoed in blood.

"Ask," she invited.

"The shooting," I breathed. "Norman."

"He phoned me a couple of hours ago."

"After the shooting?"

"Not Junior's," she smiled mockingly at me. "Norman didn't want Junior dead. Just snatched. You'd be surprised how many guys are trying to wangle a hunk of the inheritance."

"You, for one."

"I told you it all goes to heaven."

"Not if the old man dies first. Then as widow it would go to you. Unless Junior cut in for a bite. Which brings us to the fact that you're the party who took Junior's call and told him to wait."

"Don't make a federal case of it," she said drily. "I passed the word to Henry immediately, and I've been here ever since. He said he'd send someone down, then called back to say there was nobody free at the plant to send. And by the time he went in person, pushing that Buick five miles an hour through town, it was all on the radio. Any more questions?"

"Still Norman," I said.

"He likes to hold my hand."

"And talk to you," I prompted.

"Not about Junior before the phone call. Before that, just that he was planning a big enough score to make my leaving Henry painless. He phoned to say the idea had been to snatch Junior, but now it was all off, and good-by."

"How'd you get fancy shooting out of that?"

"From Joe. He called earlier from Seymour. Joe likes to hold my hand also. So would you. Even old skin and bones. It's all I can do to keep from laughing in his face when—"

"Okay," I cut in thickly. "You make our shoelaces pop just looking at you. What about Joe?"

"He wants it all," she shrugged. "Norman's scared out, but Joe wants to try again, with my help. For which I'll not only get a cut of his score, but a bonus as well—him. He told me about Junior and Junior's pals: a fancy shooting gunsel and what Joe calls 'a goof with a lucky punch'. That's Joe's big head. He's known around the hick rings as Resinback. The only reason he isn't the heavyweight champ, he'll tell you, is there's a conspiracy. Now, how about answering my question?"

"What question?" I breathed.

"Why the gat?"

"It keeps me warm."

Her smile grew wise. "You'll tell me. You're aching to become close friends all of a sudden. And close friends don't hide secrets, do they?"

And I guess she was right, because when I awoke the next morning, my .32 was gone.

CHAPTER FOUR

El Magico

SHE was on the thigh. Did I tell you that, Pete? That was the reason for her dazed-looking eyes. A lush, tapering, skin-you-ache-to-caress thigh, but dotted like a pincushion. A babe you couldn't trust under any circumstances.

Even now, as I scribble this, it's hard to figure her. It's hard to figure other items—why my hunch hasn't paid off yet, for instance. It's afternoon now, and the raindrops spattering on the green-tinted glass over us has kept office workers from wandering up to this gadget-filled penthouse. But it shouldn't have kept my hunch from materializing. The gadgets are electronic: meteorological reports; others that operate dials I don't savvy. If I haven't described it, this penthouse has three walls and a roof of glass: The fourth wall holds a locked door all Sailor's heft can't budge. It's a solid wall. I know what's behind it. I'm

counting on what's behind it, but it won't do us any good at all if my hunch doesn't pay off. If night finds us still here, hunger will drive us into the streets; then it'll be in the Laps.

I was saying it was hard to figure Suzy. Getting my .32 didn't call for that much effort. Steering me wild over the shooting of Junior made no sense. What did it matter what I thought about it? A crazy bimbo on the thigh who had somehow wangled herself into marriage with multi-millionaire Henry Dunhill, Senior. And none of it made sense.

I shrugged it off and concentrated on Sailor Duffy.

If the trampled weeds in that rear yard were an indication, the cops must have milled about like cattle in a corral. Finding a trace of Sailor's passage was a job for Houdini, not Wale. I stood there, mulling the prospects, when I heard a car brake to a halt in the street behind me. Its door swung open and slammed.

That would be the two-toned Pontiac which had appeared before me, behind me, coming, going, and parked, along the thirty-block route I had walked from breakfast to the alley. Two men had been in it, careful about my spotting their faces. Probably Marvin's lads, or ops from the agency Senior employed to investigate me.

I heard footsteps turn into the alley, lost them as an aircraft droned overhead, didn't hear them when it passed. Whoever it was was content to peek at my back, probably from the alley's edge.

A tail didn't bother me nearly as much as Sailor's continued absence. The eleven A.M. newscast said, "the big, bald man" was still at large. It also said Junior remained in a coma.

It was noon now. I'd come to the alley to pick up Sailor's trail. Now I tabled that project and took five running steps to scale the clapboard fence instead.

I crouched where I landed and winked at the boy gaping at me from a kitchen win-

dow of the house whose yard I occupied. He grinned and returned my wink. From beyond the fence I heard the sudden clatter of toppled garbage pails, followed by a spate of blasphemy and a hoarse, "Hank! He's makin' a break! Head him off!"

Gears clashed in the street beyond the alley. I peeked through a knothole in the fence, then quietly scaled it again. My toppled pursuer, a heavy-set blond man, was sitting with his back to me amid the garbage, inspecting his knee through a tear in his light blue trousers. He started to turn at my approach, but I conked him over the head with a rock, and he lay down to sleep instead. His dislodged hat caught my eye.

Two punctures in its light blue crown—coming and going. So he wasn't Marvin's boy. Or from Conners' agency. I didn't recognize him—just the holes. It had been too dark for me to notice the faces spilling from the green Cadillac last night. But who else would be wearing bullet holes in his hat? If they wanted revenge because I queered their play at Junior, why hadn't they utilized any of the dozen chances they had had at me in the thirty blocks from breakfast to here? If they were just tailing me, *why?*

I carried the query out of the alley with me. The Pontiac was due back, and I couldn't expect its driver to oblige me with a chance at his noggin with a rock also.

Then the Pontiac came roaring around the opposite corner, and, from a poolhall doorway a block distant, I watched them stagger from the alley like a brace of drunks.

WHAT I needed was a cab. Lacking that, I waved a fin at a be-bop kid in a hot rod and spent the next few minutes trying to convince him I didn't want to race the Pontiac, just tail it. I failed to convince him, but it didn't matter. We passed the two-toned job like a jet just as it was nosing into a driveway. I yanked

the hot rod's ignition key, returned it to the kid after we'd coasted to a halt almost two blocks past the driveway and waved him out of my life.

The Pontiac was parked before Cottage Three of the Palace Courts. A Ford at the pumps was being serviced by Lily Howard, but she couldn't have seen my progress behind the arc of cottages without X-ray eyes. And the drone of a passing aircraft blotted what sounds I made crouching under the rear window of Cottage Three.

When it passed, I heard an unfamiliar voice, evidently on a phone: "—Flim-flammed Mike with a rock, can you beat it? He ain't no stiff. Whatever you think, he ain't no dime-a-dozen punk. Hah? I just think we're wrong bookin' him for Mr. Fall. He's too damn unexpected. Better we rub him and settle for— Hah? *Who?* Holy mackerel! Forget I shot off my yap. You know what you're doin'. Sure. *Sure!* He's tailor-made. Seein' you."

The connection clicked, and a second voice asked plaintively, "Now what?"

"Nothin'," the phoner said smugly. "We do it just like advertised. How's the head?"

"It feels busted. If I could get my hands on that little louse I'd—"

"You did it all by yourself, Mike. Don't forget for a minute."

"What'll we do now?"

"We wait for what the Deacon says to do next, that's what!"

"Suppose the punk snaps outta his fog in the hospital and starts poppin' off? We still wait then, Hank? The Deacon got an answer for that?"

Hank laughed. "You should ask! He got you outta that jam in Detroit, didn't he? The bulls walk in after that fat dame squawked about the noise, and there we were with two stiffs in the closet. Did the Deacon find an answer for that?"

"I guess so."

"You *guess* so! The bulls wasn't half in the door before he had the Bible out and you and Suzy standin' before him. 'Gen-

tlemen,'" he says, your arrival is happily timed. We lack a second witness.' And the next thing, the bulls is standin' there with their hats in their hands witnessin' you getting hitched to Suzy!"

"That screwy dame!"

"Sure she's screwy. But the Deacon's got her eatin' outta his palm, ain't he? Don't worry about the punk singin'. The Deacon's got him fixed also. One thing you never wanna forget, Mike. The Deacon's got an answer for everythin'. Don't you forget it for a—" The airplane roar drowned the next exchange. When it subsided, Hank was growling, "What's that damn dog yappin' at?"

A yellow and white mongrel with half a tail and one chewed ear was yapping at me under the window. By the time the window flew all the way open the mongrel had run off.

A familiar face jutted from the window, gaping at the half a tail following the mongrel into tall weeds behind the arc of cottages. "Musta seen a rabbit," he muttered, withdrawing his head and slamming the window.

The mongrel vanished, spurred by the rock I'd heaved at it, leaving me between Cottages Three and Four pondering the imponderables. Hank's hat wouldn't have featured bullet holes after all. He was the graying, bull-dog-faced "Two-ton," the gorilla Sailor had kyoed.

The imponderables? Not that I was nominated Mr. Fall. Even if they didn't know I was already wanted for murder, strangers always qualify as fall guys, particularly gun-handy strangers. Add my missing .32 to the picture, and all that was needed was a corpse—Henry Dunhill, Senior's, for instance—which would leave Dunhill City in Suzy's willing lap and Suzy in the palm of the Deacon's hand. What baffled me was Mike's worry that Junior might "pop off."

What could he say to jeopardize the gravy train? Kill him, sure. That cleared

Suzy's inheritance. But he was as much of a stranger as I. He'd been out of touch with his pop for four years. What could he know to say?

I GAVE it up and moved to the rear of Cottage Seven. Its window was shut, the blinds were drawn. But the rear door opened to my tug.

My bag was gone. I was about to follow its example when the cot caught my eye and sent a chill prickle up my nape. Its blanket was dishevelled, and someone had lain on it, then under it. On the rumpled pillow were dried brown streaks. Under the blanket were snips of bandage and white tape.

Lily Howard was no longer at the pumps, nor in the store or office. Nor in the bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen flanking a hallway beyond the office. Nor in the store room at the hall's end. I was about to

"Honey," she said, "you gotta snap out of it."



launch a tour of the remaining cottages when her voice reached me from below.

Wooden steps led down to a damp, musty basement. Her voice came from a small room beyond the oil burner, pleading, "All right! All right! Will you, for cryin' out loud, cut it out? Honey, you gotta snap out of it."

She was stooping over someone on a cot, wrestling a pair of huge fists that kept bobbing her palms up toward her anxious face. On a stool behind her rested a tray holding a plate piled high with brown beans, half a loaf of bread, a thick chunk of store cheese, a slab of marble cake, and a steaming cup of coffee.

She wasn't aware of me until I stood at her side gazing down into Sailor Duffy's tortured eyes. Then she gasped, "My Gawd, honey! I thought you'd never get back."

Sailor kept working his fists up and down against her palms as if I weren't there. A splotch of red-tinted bandage perched on the crown of his forehead. Dried blood spotted his grey-stubbled cheeks. His shirt was torn and grime-streaked. A jagged split ran down the side of his trousers exposing a purple welt on his bared thigh.

My face stooping over him meant nothing. He was lost behind the anguish of his eyes, living again the battles that used to fill Madison Square Garden to the roof with roaring sadists.

"Do something!" Lily pleaded. "Please, Charley."

I slapped Sailor's face.

He blinked at me.

"Take nine!" I yelled at him, my face inches from his. "You hear me, you big ape? Take nine! One! Two! Three! Four—"

At "eight" droplets of sweat appeared on his forehead. His eyes focused on me wildly.

"Cash!" he grunted.

I grinned at the recognition slowly

creeping through his battered features, then glanced up at Lily Howard's stunned expression.

"Some routine!" she breathed.

Lily wore an angry red splotch on her left cheekbone that faded into the redness suffusing all her features when I told her fervently, "I owe you my right eye."

"You already paid his rent."

"Not for hiding him down here."

Scorn wreathed her features. "That Marvin! "Big, bald guy', my foot! Slugger didn't shoot that boy. He was chasin' the fella who did!"

"You saw him?"

"Sure, I—"

"Cash," Sailor croaked, drawing my attention down to the bafflement mirrored in his face. "I went punchy, hagh?"

"You didn't go, pally. You were pushed. With a sap."

"Sapped?" His eyes blanked as he probed the hazy corridors of his memory. Then, "Nah. Nah, Cash. I don't remember gettin' sapped. I'm stannin inna door like, ya tell me. Alluviasudden like a firewoiks in fronna th' jalop. I see the' kid drop. I see a guy stannin onna street wit' a rod. I yell at him annie powders away like a bat. Like a bat, Cash. I crossa street affa him an—an—" His features twisted into a gigantic effort to recollect the scene. They smoothed out. He shook his head. "I dunno. I dunno. Alluviasudden nothin', Ca—"

"Charley," I put in gently.

"Hokay. Charley. I black out." He swallowed hard. "Sapped?"

I nodded. "Then you got up and chased the guy from reflex. You sure it wasn't a dame?"

"Nah, nah, Charley. I ketch a dame easy. A guy. Runnin' like a bat. Skinny built. Kinna dark clo's. He run inna yard like a bat. Like a bat. I run affa him—"

"It was a man, all right!" Lily Howard put in emphatically. "I saw him!"

"When?"

"A little after you left me last night. I

heard yellin' in the street and got to the door in time to see a fella jump into a big sedan parked up the block. Slugger was runnin' down the middle of the street, yellin' for the fella to stop. The car jumped from the curb like it was shot from a cannon, and I yelled for Slugger to get out of the way. Next thing I knew, he was ten feet in the air and the sedan was turnin' the corner on two wheels. By the time I reached the sidewalk, Slugger was crawlin' toward me on all fours, blood pourin' all over his head."

SHE broke off to beam at Sailor, who was now sitting up and gaping at her with a complexion a tomato would envy. The scarlet of it ran up from his neck, over his nude scalp, and down to his neck again.

"Cash?" he asked thickly. "I slug her? Hagh? Did I slug her, Cash? Hagh, Cash? Hagh?"

"No, honey," she soothed, putting her arm across his shoulders and sitting next to him, causing beads of sweat to crop out over his tomato flush. "All your swingin' was in slow motion. Mostly we wrestled. This,"—he fingered the bruise on her cheekbone, then gestured toward newsphotos thumbtacked to the wall over Sailor's head—"that slob gave me. Not you, honey. Hungry?"

"Hokay," he whispered, wearing the sort of expression most of us reserve for girls in our higher class dreams.

While their romance blossomed over the tray of food, I studied the pictures of her husband on the wall, all clipped from sports pages. The mashed-nose face was the one I had last seen shaking from side to side as he crawled back toward the green Cadillac from Sailor's sudden fists.

TIGER JOE HOWARD, was the usual caption. "Resinback" was evidently a word-of-mouth title: the "Joe" Suzy had told me "wants it all". But he couldn't have beaten us to Dunhill City and shot Junior. Ditto for Hank and Mike in Cottage Three, or

the other lad whose hat my slug removed. Or Lieutenant Norman, with his .45. Leaving X—alias "The Deacon."

"You get a good look at the guy Slugger chased?" I said to Lily.

"No, honey. Just a glimpse as he got into the sedan. Enough to see it was a man, that's all. The rest of the time I was watching Sailor Duff—"

She became as red as the Sailor under my stare.

"Slugger Dugan," I corrected her softly.

"I couldn't help listenin' to him rave, honey."

"He raves now and then," I admitted.

"I'm a live-and-let-live gal, honey. And I told you I got a weakness for fighters."

I forced a reassuring smile at her. "Okay, Lily. You say Resinback slugged you?"

"This morning. When I wasn't gonna let him have Cottage Three for him and his crumbum friends." She glowered at the photos on the wall. "Second time he punched me. Ever since he took up with that creepy Norman at the radar plant he's been goin' around like Humphrey Bogart."

"What crumbum friends?"

"Hank Joyce and Mike Dunn. It's a wonder Bill Jared ain't with 'em. The way them four and Norman hang around together you'd think they were married."

"Ever hear of somebody called 'the Deacon'?"

"Deacon?" She began shaking her head, switched to a nod. "Once. Resinback and Norman were talkin' about how a deacon spent a night in Cottage Two. About a month—no, three weeks ago. The day Mister Fred got killed. That's the other time Resinback hit me. I went around with a shiner for a week. He said it was 'on account.' He came sneakin' in that night and said to tell anybody who asked that he'd been with me here all day. Then he slugged me and said if I didn't back him up he'd cripple me. But nobody ever asked me. Whatever he done, it wasn't found out. Or

they must have blamed someone else."

"*God!*" I blurted, gaping at her, but not seeing her. The little wheels were finally turning. "What he did was found out, all right," I heard myself say. "But they didn't blame Resinback. They blamed God!"

"Huh?"

"For the metal parts that dropped on Mister Fred and broke his neck! Nobody came after Resinback because they figured it was an accident. What the insurance companies call 'an act of God'!"

ALL she could do was gape at me. But how else could the gravy-train mob move in? For much smaller scores, other mobs have spent years laying groundworks. In this deal they just needed time enough to plant someone near enough to Frederick Dunhill to shove him out the back exit when the time came, the time being when Susy's sex appeal unseated old Henry Dunhill's widowerhood.

Using Resinback to clobber Uncle Fred with the metal parts fitted neatly. A local yokel on the make, he wouldn't balk at a touch of homicide enroute to a berth on the gravy train.

He hadn't, and now only one life stood between Suzy and Dunhill City. But it wouldn't do to try another falling crate on old Henry's noggin. Too coincidental. What else? A slug from the .32 Suzy swiped from Mr. Fall, for instance.

Then, when Junior entered the equation, shooting him became logical, the removal of an impediment to Suzy's clear title to Dunhill City. But worrying that he might "pop off" made no sense at all.

I got back on the main track again when I thought about the reason for my tails, Hank Joyce and Mike Dunn. Not the reason that they tailed me; that was as logical as killing Junior. If I was Mr. Fall—the guy to be tabbed for shooting old Henry, knowing my whereabouts every minute was obligatory.

But it was the way they went about it—

not as the lads of a high-flying mob would. Hank and Mike had tailed me like a brace of correspondence school detectives, or girl scouts on a hunt for Easter eggs. They let me spot their flashy Pontiac a dozen times on my thirty-block walk from breakfast to the alley! And then, when I clobbered Mike, they dropped me like a hot potato!

Why?

Like sleight of hand, *El Magico* diddles a fantasy with one hand, drawing your attention to it, while the unnoticed hand manipulates the gimmick. And the gimmick? What else but the aircraft I kept hearing since breakfast, Lieutenant Norman watching me from the Dunhill helicopter while I concentrated on Hank and Mike, whose main object was to attract my concentration.

Why?

Because the green Cadillac mob didn't want a loose end cropping up—like the "big, bald guy" whose fistmanship matched my shootmanship. And who else would they expect to lead them to him?

The force of logic drove my attention from Sailor's eating, and Lily's anxious watching, through the room's open doorway into the basement with its sweating pipes and the bottom of the wooden stairway leading up.

I stepped out of the room and looked up—at the empty stairway leading to a closed door. Lily Howard loomed behind me.

"Something wrong, honey. You turned white."

I moved to the stairway, turned, and whispered, "Got a gun around?"

"I don't like guns. Why?"

"I'll want to sneak Slugger out of town as soon as it gets dark. Resinback and his crumbums may try to stop us."

"How could they know Slugger's here?"

I started up the stairway, paused midway to face her worriment. "Something tells me they do. You willing to crawl a limb for Slugger? We'll need transportation tonight. Enough to get us at least fifty miles

away from here. That ought to do it."

She put her hand on my shoulder. My advantage on the stairs brought our faces level. "Take the jeep!" she whispered eagerly. "Take it as far as you want, then send me a card."

I don't know how long our stares held. I wanted to don one of those sheet metal double breasters and ride a spear into a dragon for her. I wanted to tell her they were crowning the wrong woman in England. I told her, "Now I owe you both eyes."

"I have a weakness," she began.

"I know," I said. "Heavyweights. And probably stray dogs and cats. And fugitives—"

"You could have run off and left Sailor Duffy to be caught," she breathed. "But you didn't." She closed the gap between our faces and it was nothing like the explosion from sexy Suzy's lips, but I wouldn't have swapped it for a year of

Suzy's passion, not today or any day.

When we were two again, I told her thickly, "I'll be back for him tonight," then mounted the remaining steps, and pushed out the door.

I would have pushed back in again had the door not swung shut behind me. I hadn't enough time to risk opening it again. I skittered to the opposite wall and waited.

All I could see from there was his leg swinging back and forth alongside the office desk. From outside the basement door I'd seen all of him in profile, even the bandage patch on the hair behind his ear: the tail I'd clouted, Mike Dunn, sitting on the office desk and putting a match to a cigar in his face.

I watched the match drift to the floor. Looking past him outside, I could see beetle-browed Joe Howard servicing a Packard at the pumps.

It took a week of patient back-peddalling

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for me to reach the storeroom at the hall's end. I was starting to raise a window when, through it, I spotted the door of Cottage Three swing open to disgorge Lieutenant Jack Norman.

His knuckles and his cadaverous face displayed the trail of my .32's muzzle in the form of small band-aid patches. He started toward me, halted in mid-stride, and looked sharply to my left.

His lips formed a silent O. He turned to my right and strode swiftly out of my vision. I could hear his shoes crunch gravel all along the storeroom's side and continue toward the front.

My face reflected in the window looked as unhappy as my thoughts. If the "Deacon" knew as many answers as I was beginning to suspect he did, this was more of *El Magico's* sleight of hand.

I proved that a few moments later by sliding open the window, leaping over the sill and making a dash between Cottages Four and Five to the tall weeds beyond.

I was bellied deep in them at the edge of the narrow clearing beyond the arc of cottages when bulldog-faced Hank Joyce came tearing between Cottages Three and Four. He broke into the tall weeds three yards from me. I could hear him thrashing through them away from me. I didn't hear him return, because by then I was at least a block away.

And going.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Loose End

HENRY DUNHILL, Senior's, voice sounded even crankier on the phone than in person: "Who? Who? Speak up, man! Who is it?"

"Charley Wilson," I said for the third time. "I want to—"

"Ah, yes! Charles! Have you seen the boy?"

"Not yet. You see—"

"Well, get right over there! Haven't had a moment's peace. Unable to go myself. But you, Charles—immediately! See you at dinner!"

Click!

This, after going through half a dozen dimes tracing him through the maze of offices he evidently kept bouncing in and out of like a ball in a four-wall hand-ball game.

I considered calling him back, but dialed his house instead.

Susan Dunhill's voice was hoarse and panting, as if she had run upstairs to reach the phone. Irritation possessed it when I said, "It's Charley, kid, I missed you this morning, I missed my .32 also."

She gave this some thought. I could hear her breath, still hoarse and panting. "What do you want of me?"

"I just called to see if you were home," I said to her. "I'll be there pretty soon."

"Oh, great!" came out of her with what sounded like a sob. Another burst of sound followed it, and another. I couldn't tell whether she were weeping or laughing. Before I could discover which, the connection broke. I dialed again.

I heard the other phone ring three minutes before a man's voice growled, "Yeah?"

"Mrs. Howard, please."

"She ain't here."

"Could you tell me when she'll be back? She asked me to call back. Said she'd know whether I'd be able to rent a cottage tonight. Paige. Peter Paige. Did she tell you about it?"

The man's voice relaxed and smoothed out. "No, Mr. Paige. But don't worry about a reservation. We'll fix you up. I'm Mr. Howard. My wife was called out of town unexpectedly. What time you wanna move in?"

I wasn't worried. I was hysterical, feeling my thoughts straining like wild dogs on leashes. They had Sailor and Lily Howard; that was a mathematical certainty. If I had had artillery, I wouldn't have

paused to reason; I'd have rushed back and blasted them free of that basement trap. I toyed with the idea of conning a rod from a pawnshop, if Dunhill City had such a thing, or chucking a rock through a sport store window, or ambushing a cop for his hardware, and discarded them all and finally settled down to reason.

I didn't even know whether Sailor and Lily were still in the basement. What counted was that I had a line on the gravy-train mob. A little more data, and I would no longer be Mr. Fall; I'd be in a position to force Sailor and Lily free the easy way, with the data they feared Junior might "pop off" about.

WHEN I saw Junior, his head seemed shrunken within its bandages. "One word answers," I whispered low enough to escape the big red ears of the cop stationed at the door. "The nurse gave me only five minutes. You're not to get excited."

Junior whispered. "My pop?"

"You're solid!" I forced a grin at him. "I've been getting a preview of your fatted calf. Did you see who plugged you, kid?"

"No."

"Last night you told me I was right. Something I'd know—"

"My stepmother, Charley." Junior licked his lips, whispered. "She answered phone, knew where I was. Who else?"

"But you didn't see if it was a dame?"

"No, Charley. Saw nothin'."

"You mention that other business to the cops?" Before he could answer, I went on, "Save your breath. Slip of the brain. I forgot I'm the first one they'd let talk to you and not even me if your old man didn't have the hospital in his hip pocket. Let's keep the Cadillac business to ourselves until your pop investigates it from his end. Oke?"

"Oke, Charley."

"I've nosed around a little and came

up with a riddle. You know something somebody doesn't want broadcast. Any idea what it could be?"

He looked blankly at me. I shifted tack.

"Your stepmother, for instance. She's around twenty-five, a slender brunette with classy bumps. She takes hop. Needles it in her thigh. Sound like anyone you ever knew?"

"God, no! You mean my pop married."

"One word answers," I cut in. "Think hard, kid. Ever hear of a Mike Dunn?"

"No, Charley."

"Time's running out. I'll run down a list of names. If any one registers, give me the office. Hank Joyce? A pug named Joe Howard? Bill Jared? Someone called 'the Deacon'?"

"None of 'em, Charley."

I stared at him helplessly, out of names, questions, ideas. Before I could think of anything else a chunky, red-haired interne appeared at my side with a hypodermic needle cocked for action.

He swabbed Junior's scrawny bicep, used the needle, passed it absent-mindedly to me, nodding toward a waste basket. "Will you toss it there, please."

I took it and tossed it while he stripped off rubber gloves. He swabbed the puncture, patted Junior's shoulder, nodded to me, and marched briskly past the cop. I started after him to query him about Junior's condition and got as far as the cop's fingers on my sleeve.

"You Wilson?"

"That's right."

"Chief Marvin wants you to—" He swallowed the rest as the white-haired nurse who had admitted me hustled up the corridor.

"Oh, Mr. Wilson. I was coming to end your visit. The doctor will be along any moment now."

"He was," I told her. "Gave Junior an injection. You just passed him."

"Passed him?" she regarded me incredulously. "But I just left—" She broke off

to peer past me into the room, murmured to herself, "But why an injection?"

I didn't know. She threw a worried glance down the corridor, then whirled and sped after it. The cop's fingers kept me from speeding after her.

"Chief wants you down at headquarters when you've got time—."

I said okay, got my sleeve back, and carried it down the corridor, passing the nurse on her return trip. She didn't see me. She was almost trotting to keep pace with the surgeon who had operated on Junior. He looked as worried as she, telling her, as I passed them, "—Fail to understand why. There's no need for a post-operative—"

The rest of it was blotted by the elevator door sliding shut behind me. But what I heard was too much. It took all my willpower to keep me from breaking into a wild dash when I reached the street.

I walked, and by the end of three blocks it became evident Hank Joyce had not picked up my trail. But why should he? My visit with Junior had accomplished his mission. I was no longer Mr. Fall.

I was Mr. Fallen!

SUSAN DUNHILL had troubles of her own. She sat on the dusty pink broadloom of her bedroom floor and pleaded, when I stood over her, "Help me, Charley. Help me! Please—"

I shut the door behind me, stepped over her outstretched limbs and busied myself with the drawers of her blond-wood, three-mirrored vanity, yanking them open and running my hands through their contents. Not that I actually expected my .32 to be there, but I was grasping for straws.

I tried the bureau drawers next, groping through her lingerie and his haberdashery and coming up with nothing more interesting than a case holding his spare, brown-stained upper plate. The night table drawer yielded even less. I ripped the shocking pink coverlet, the pillows, the sheets off the bed

and prowled around carefully in the closet.

That finished the room, and I closed my eyes and mentally prowled the room again, imagined myself back in the hospital, again heard Mike Dunn ask, "Suppose the punk snaps outta his fog in the hospital and starts poppin' off?"

And there it was!

I returned to Susan Dunhill and stared down at her. Blood trickled down her trembling thigh. All of her was trembling; particularly her fingers wrapped around a smaller hypo than the one the red-haired interne used on Junior.

Her dazed eyes seemed larger than the rest of her face. She was mostly out of a filmy black lace negligee, grimly trying to aim the trembling needle at a proper spot in her puncture-dotted thigh. Black locks tumbled over her eyes. She elbowed them back, tried to focus eyes up at me.

"Please, Charley."

"What's the use?" I asked her gently. "It's empty."

"No! No! Maybe there's some left! If you would help me find a vein—"

"And shoot air into it?" I shook my head. "It might kill you, Suzy." I stared into the lost wastes of her eyes and softly told her, "I know where the Deacon keeps his stock."

Her eyes tried to swallow me. "Where, Charley? *Where?*"

"Give and take?" I cocked a brow at her.

She nodded eagerly and forced a grotesque smile to her lips.

"Anything you want, darling! Things you never dreamed possible! I'll—"

"My gat?" I cut in.

Her face broke into a million quivering, disillusioned lines, shaking back and forth wordlessly.

"He got it?" I urged. "The Deacon?"

She nodded herself down to a sobbing heap on the rug.

I walked past her to the phone on the night table, switched on the reading lamp,

dialed the Palace Courts and brooded out the window at the Adirondack peaks melting into a darkening sky. My revolver wouldn't be on the premises. I knew that now. I knew everything now. There was no answer from the Palace Courts. That figured. I broke the connection and dialled Henry Dunhill's main office, got a switchboard brush-off: "Mr. Dunhill left about fifteen minutes ago."

I asked, "How about Lieutenant Norman? Would he be around?"

"He also—" she began, only to be cut off by a vaguely familiar voice: "I'll take it on this extension, Madeleine. Wilson?"

I took a deep breath and said, "I want a safe exit for the big guy and myself, and hands off Lily Howard. Or I'll blow the whistle."

She hesitated a fraction, then asked softly, "What whistle?"

"The stuff I've written down and put in an envelope addressed to the F.B.I. How this town was stolen in broad daylight, starting with Suzy and the Deacon conning old Dunhill in Chi, and winding up with the Deacon personally shooting Junior last night."

"Is that how it is?" he asked softly.

"All it takes is for the F.B.I. to check two sets of fingerprints, Loot, and we both know where they can be found. I'm calling from a booth. I'll call you back in five minutes from a different booth. If you decide to play ball, I'll tell you then how to swap the big guy for the letter. If you don't—"

"I'll tell you what," he began, and talked on from there, his words vague noises in my ear as my brain awoke to an implication latent in the situation since the onset of our dialogue.

"He also—" the switchboard girl had started to say, implying Norman also had left the office! But Norman had cut in, claiming to be on the extension—a two and two that added up to five—unless the extension was at this end—downstairs—the

ivory phone that was in the library!

His voice droned tinny against the night table's top where I gently laid the receiver.

Susan continued to sob into the pink broadloom rug. The door beyond her remained closed. I moved quickly to the window, carefully slid it open, and threw a leg over the sill. My other leg wouldn't follow. It was nailed to the wall by a red hot wire. I waited like that, one foot out the window, listening to echoes of gun blast rolling back and forth among the bedroom walls.

I waited for a second slug—in my back. It didn't come. Instead, the dry, cranky voice of Henry Dunhill, Senior:

"You can't make it, Wale. Close the window and turn around."

I DIDN'T want to close the window. I allowed my wounded thigh to crumple under me and wound up on the floor facing him, probing the nature of my wound by flexing my calf, wriggling my toes. It seemed all right. I couldn't feel much bleeding. I couldn't feel much of anything.

He gripped a small-bore pistol, this man with Henry Dunhill's face, Henry Dunhill's name, Henry Dunhill's wife. He stood beside Hank Joyce in the doorway and regarded me thoughtfully, still aiming his long-barreled target pistol at me. Probably a .28. Probably the one he used last night in his desperate attempt to stop Junior Dunhill from seeing him and blurting: "You're not my pop!"

Hank Joyce goggled down at the bare, trembling back at his feet. "What's with Suzy?"

"Yens," the old man said distastefully. "I cut off her supply to teach her discipline." He turned to eye Lieutenant Norman standing behind his .45 in the doorway.

Norman looked worried as he stared at the thin trickle of scarlet seeping from the hole in my trousers.

"You had to plug him *now?*" he asked.

"Another second he'd have been out the window," the old man shrugged.

"He say how he caught the pitch?"

An irritated gesture from the old man.
"She told him, of course—"

"I didn't!" Susan screeched, hammering her fists on the rug. *"I didn't! I didn't!"*

"She didn't!" croaked out of me as he cocked a shoe at her ear.

His shoe rejoined its mate. He pursed his lips at me thoughtfully, shrugged, and told the girl, his voice gentle again, "All right, m'dear. I could be wrong. Get up."

She came up eagerly, wrapping the black negligee about her trembling loveliness with trembling fingers. "I got the yens so bad, Deke."

"Of course," he murmured. "I've been harsh. Bill has a shot for you in his room. But dress first. We expect company. Wouldn't do for them to find you like this. Particularly Marvin. Family man."

She snatched things from the confusion I had made of the bureau drawers, whirled to the closet, asking him over her shoulder, "The black dress, Deke? Should I—"

He nodded that she should, told Hank, "Go to the plant now. Understand everything?"

"Sure," Hank's bulldog face widened in a grin. "Call here, then Marvin at headquarters." And he turned to go out.

Susan followed him with the black crepe dress draped over her arms. The old man shifted his pursed lips from her departing back to me. "If she didn't betray me, Wale, who did?"

"The same party who tipped you I was Wale," I said.

"Now he's angling," the old man said, smiling tightly at Norman. "Conners' Agency identified you, Wale. Matched the prints on the milk glass you handled last night. They're sitting on the info until I pass the word. I told you. Tell me."

"Hank and Mike," I lied. "I was parked under a rear window at the Palace Courts

while they banded secrets with each other."

"He was under the window, all right," Norman scowled. "I saw him from the helicopter."

"No," the old man said thoughtfully. "He wouldn't have risked returning here if he had the information then. He would have actually written a letter, phoned from a booth, and had us."

The old man paused to face a new character in the doorway. Not so new a character at that. The chunky, red-haired interne. He wore a brown double breaster in place of the white uniform he had worn while jabbing the needle into Junior's arm. His voice was low. "Company, Deke. Mike and Joe—with Joe's wife and Duffy."

"Hold them, Bill. I want Suzy here first. Before that, let's wind up the preliminaries."

Bill nodded, and the old man crossed to the phone, dialed rapidly, barked, "Conners? Dunhill! I decided your suggestion is better. About Cash Wale. Too dangerous to leave him at large. Inform the police, will you? Good!"

He broke the connection and returned to the center of the room where he threw his glasses to the rug and stepped on them. He ripped open his Herbert Hoover collar, tore the lapel of his black jacket, pulled his shirt into a bulgy twist under his neck, glanced at Norman, who nodded judiciously, then faced Bill and closed his eyes.

A SECOND later the old man lay on the rug gingerly feeling his split lip. His left eye was commencing to puff. He ignored Bill, standing white-faced over him, rubbing his knuckles, and looked askance at Norman, who said quietly, "That should do it, Deke. Scat, Bill."

"You'll fumble!" I croaked at him. "Nobody can think of that many answers!"

He snorted. "You're all the answer I need! Young Dunhill, for example. Dead! Injected with diluted rat poison. Only your prints on the hypo."

"I know about that," came out of me hoarsely. "Bill wore rubber gloves. But he wasn't invisible. He was seen by a cop."

"Officer Schmidt saw what I paid him to see—you were alone with the boy."

"It's too complicated!" I argued hoarsely, trying to stall, trying to think. "You'll leave loose ends! You'll be tripped by—"

He turned away, muttering, "All the loose ends are under this roof," then greeted Susan entering the bedroom. "Magnificent transformation, m'dear."

An understatement. The nightmare hop-head of a few moments ago was buried in last night's poised siren.

"Will I knock 'em dead in Peoria?"

The phone trilled before he could reply. "Dunhill!" he barked into it. "Joyce? What is it? . . . I see. Find Lieutenant Norman and tell him—" He broke off, winked at Lieutenant Norman, held the instrument away from his mouth, and shouted, "Charles! Get away from my wife! What are you doing with that gun? Charles!"

He broke the connection, stared down at the instrument. Almost immediately it began trilling again. He strode to the girl, letting it ring. "How they'll like you in Dunhill City is more to the point, m'dear."

"They love me everywhere."

"Particularly Wale. Here. I already show the effects of tussling with him.. Now you. Like this."

His fingers grabbed her dress and ripped the black fabric downward. He rumpled her hair until it dangled over one eye. "Now you makeup, m'dear. I want traces of it all over Wale. Jack—"

Norman came behind me while Susan dropped to her knees and smeared her lipstick over my lips, my cheeks, down along my shirt collar and drew back, finally, her excitement gleaming through her streaked makeup. "We look good enough, Deke?"

"Perfect," he murmured. "I meant to ask you, why'd Wale come back?"

"His gat," she laughed.

The old man brought my .32 from under

his belt, smiled frostily at me. "If there's a loose end, Wale, it's yours. This. The only one that matters."

"Deke!" the girl called. "Is this okay?"

"Almost, m'dear. Your expression is too gay. Show me terror, hysteria, shame."

"Like this?"

"Exactly!" the old man murmured, and my .32 in his hand jumped.

She remained frozen in her posture of abandon, her expression of terror, mingled with hysteria and shame, only slightly marred by the purple dot under her eye. A trickle of blood spotted the pillow.

The phone, which had been ringing steadily, grew silent.

"Let's wind it up!" Norman growled.

The old man smiled sardonically at the ashes I wore for a face. "What a homicidal maniac you are! First my son! Now my wife! Who would search past your fingerprints on the hypo? Or your prints on your own gun? Do you think they will call this Cash Wale's Second Massacre?" He walked to the door and called out, "Bill? Send them in now—"

SAILOR DUFFY'S eyes flickered at me, shifted to the corpse of Susan Dunhill, found Lieutenant Norman behind me and grew icy. He moved forward under the prod of a revolver in Mike Dunn's fist.

A livid welt along the side of his jaw showed where a revolver barrel had landed. He moved stiffly, stopping when Mike Dunn's voice lashed out, "Hold it right there! Don't even *think* of movin'!"

Lily Howard's grief-stricken eyes jumped from me to Susan Dunhill's grotesquely postured corpse.

"Don't worry about Lil, Deke," Joe Howard grinned, his mash-nosed face almost as gargoyleish as Sailor Duffy's. "I got her just where I want. She had the goof stashed down in my old room, can you imagine?"

"I'll try," the old man said drily. He walked around the group, balancing my .32

in his palm. He winked at red-haired Bill Jared holding a medium caliber automatic in his fist in the doorway, paused to face Joe Howard's grin. "One thing I can't imagine, Joe, is you jabbering less and listening more."

"What's the argument?" Joe Howard shrugged. "Like you told me. Make Wale and Duffy patsies for bumpin' the kid. Dead patsies. What el—" His gaze settled on Suzy for the first time. "Holy cow!"

"You see?" the old man smiled bitterly. "She jabbered also. So Wale's the patsy for her murder, too. And the remaining loose ends. For instance, Duffy forced your wife to hide him. You worried about her unexplained absence, went to the basement room, and Duffy captured you also."

"Me?" the pug gaped at him. "Him?"

"And then brought you here to Wale," the old man nodded. "Which forced Wale's hand—his gun hand." The old man balanced my .32 in his fist. "This is Wale's gun hand."

My .32 jumped.

Lily Howard jumped first. For an instant she was a wild-eyed Amazon looming over the old man's startled face. The next instant she was a blank-eyed weight tumbling him to the rug from her husband's sudden hands on her back.

Joe Howard wanted out. He spun toward the door, into the slug ripping from Bill Jared's automatic. Joe Howard no longer wanted out. He wanted to sit down.

Bill raised his weapon for a shot at Sailor Duffy, but Mike Dunn was entangled amid the hands that once had tormented reigning fistdom. Mike Dunn became a dervish whirling toward Bill Jared's cocked pistol. Joe Howard's motionless back and Mike Dunn's feet tangled briefly. Mike Dunn wound up clutching Bill Jared's neck, bringing him—and the pistol—to a heap in the doorway.

This was garnered from the corner of my eye as I kicked Lieutenant Norman's long legs from under him. My skull met

his descending chin. His .45 went skittering along the rug past the bed.

I dove after it, coming up with it as Bill unwrapped himself from Mike and raised his automatic and just pointed it at me, crouched awkwardly, gaping, while the .45 kicked my wrist up.

Mike Dunn nudged Bill's toppling body to one side, came up with his hands empty and held high. I flicked a glance behind, saw Lieutenant Norman grimly crawling toward me, brought him to a motionless slump with a backward swipe of his .45, and roared at Sailor, "*Don't!*"

The big guy paused, eyed me blankly. "*Hagh, Cash?*" His left hand bunched the old man's shirt front, holding him halfway to his feet. Sailor's right was poised to demolish the old man's cranky, pop-eyed face.

"Let him go," I croaked.

"*Lil!*" Sailor croaked back at me. "He plug her dead, Cash—"

"I know. She had a weakness for pugs. But he's our only way out. Let him go."

"*Hokay!*" Sailor grumbled thickly, and the old man flew back across the room, landing spread-eagled against a wall. "*Hokay?*" Sailor asked me hoarsely.

I watched the old man's head jerk up at the approach of a siren threading its torturous way through the night.

I retrieved my .32, said, "Listen to me, Deke, they catch us, we'll talk, and then you're cooked."

"What can I do?" he mumbled.

"Stall them. Say we pulled out five minutes ago, heading north. Go down and meet them now. We're using the window. Your future depends on our getting away clear. Got it?"

"Got it," he nodded weakly. "That's how it has to be."

That's how it almost was, but patrolling squad cars drove us back toward the center of town, and my brainstorm brought us to the door below, and the Sailor and I half-carried each other the five flights up to this green glass penthouse.

But now it's almost night again, almost twenty-four hours later, and my hunch hasn't paid off. We'll risk making a break for it in an hour or so. You'll get it from the headlines if we miss. If we make it—

Hold it! Someone's coming out on the roof. It's—

EDITOR'S NOTE:

New York State readers who penetrated the disguise of "Dunhill City" are aware that the "green glass penthouse" was the control tower for the Dunhill helicopter, that vehicle being hangared beyond the penthouse's solid wall. And that it was by helicopter that Cash and Duffy escaped.

Before I could relay Cash Wale's information through the New York police to the Dunhill City police, Lily Howard had recovered sufficiently from what proved to be only a shoulder wound to identify Hank Joyce and Mike Dunn, who, in turn, blamed Lieutenant Norman and the "Deacon," whose name turned out to be Yaeger, as the conspiracy's masterminds.

But both men have been missing since the day following the shooting.

Investigation disclosed that Susan had actually married the original Henry Dunhill in Chicago a year earlier. She had a long record of narcotics violations.

Because so many questions remained open, particularly how Cash Wale penetrated "Deacon" Yaeger's disguise, I delayed submitting Cash Wale's letter to an editor until this morning, when the following communication, postmarked Denver, appeared in my mailbox:

Dear Pete,

My hunch paid off. How could the Deacon know I wouldn't drop a letter to the G boys just for the hell of it? And what better way did he and the Loot have of vanishing than up—in the helicopter?

They weren't happy to find Sailor and me ahead of them on the roof, but in face of my .32, what could they do? They thoughtfully brought a sack holding almost

a million bucks in small denominations.

It took three hours to fly to the Adirondack hunting lodge where uncle Fred Dunhill shut himself away from the world.

He bragged a bit, the Deacon. What could he lose? It began as a simple badger in Chi, when he noticed his great resemblance to bank teller and sicked sexy Suzy on old Dunhill, the idea being for her to wheedle details that Deke could use for a brief impersonation in the bank, long enough to pick up any loose scratch around.

But amid the details was uncle Fred, and the badger was shelved for the bigger project. Suzy actually was Junior's stepmother. Can you beat it?"

Deacon wanted a little return brag, but I never did tell him how I dug his pitch. His spare choppers in the bureau drawer. They were covered with brown nicotine stains. And Dunhill didn't smoke.

I'm enclosing a rough map you can pass along to the cops. To spare them heart failure, tell them they'll find the original Henry Dunhill, Senior, in the still quaking flesh. They kept him there for his signature on important documents from time to time. That pious Mr. Meek that Junior had led me to expect never gave the guard they left with him—a goon named Brady—the slightest bit of trouble.

Tell the cops their best chance to reach him is from the air. We took almost a week reaching the first town on foot. We left him enough grub to last a couple of months, and all but ten grand of the small denomination moola. He agreed that was a reasonable fee.

The cops will find him there alone. If they want the Deacon, the Loot and Brady, tell them to bring shovels. One thing led to another and the three of them tried to gang up on us the second night.

He had answers for everything, the Deacon; everything, that is, but the shootman-ship of

Your Old Pal,
Cash Wale • • •

HOW TO KILL A CORPSE

By
CHARLES
BECKMAN, JR.



When the glamorous movie star died, all America wept. Even the man who murdered her!

They wondered why I just stood there with my face stiff and set.

OVER in Brownsville, on the Texas side of the river, they were having a gay time of it. You know, *fiesta*. Charro Days. Everyone wearing a three months' growth of beard, big sombreros, gay *vestidos*. Everyone carrying a load. And over on the other side, in Matamores, up in a filthy little hotel room, a beautiful girl was dying with a bullet in her brain....

You'd think they'd feel it. They all knew her. Everyone in America knew her. You'd

think a hush would settle over the crowd, and they'd stop their laughing and guitar playing and parades and hull fights.

But no, they kept right on. Raising dust and sweating. It was winter. But down here in Brownsville in the tropical Rio Grande Valley, it was warm. So everybody kept laughing and carrying on and sweating.

If they'd known about Kit dying, their laughter would fade away. They'd get tears in their eyes. Even the men. Because everyone loved Kit. Everybody in America . . . in Mexico. Everyone who ever saw her.

That's what they said about Kit—everyone who ever saw her loved her.

But they didn't know about Kit at ten o'clock that morning. We were still looking for her. Russel Pierce, the private detective the studio had hired. Funny little Max Liebswich; her director. Me, Sam Jeffry. We'd flown down here together, during the night, and we were looking for her on both sides of the river.

By ten o'clock that morning, my bum ticker was slowing me down, and I had to leave the searching up to Max and Pierce. I walked through the crowd back to our hotel. They stared at me. The *Charros*. They looked at the stooped man with the young-old face, gray and lined, the wrinkled, slept-in suit, the deathly tired eyes. And they wondered what a creep like that was doing at Charro Days. You were supposed to be gay, happy. You know, *felicidad*.

But I walked on, and I didn't look at them. I bumped shoulders blindly. I went up to my hotel room and took a pill and lay across the bed, waiting for the tight pain in my chest to go away. I stared up at the ceiling and listened to the yelling voices down in the street. I lay there a long time until finally the phone rang.

I didn't want to pick it up. I had a feeling about what it was going to be, and I didn't want to hear it. I kept staring up at the ceiling, listening to the phone ring. And

finally I rolled over and picked it up. I held it to my ear, there on the bed, and I stared up at the ceiling fan. I said, "Yeah?"

It was Max. He was crying. Like a baby. "Sam," he choked, "Sam. . . ."

So I kept staring up at the ceiling fan, and I knew what he was going to say. Max loved her too. Mayhe more than you'd think. He wouldn't be crying like that unless it was bad.

"Sam, we found her," he whispered. "We found her, Sam. Over here in Mexico. In Matamores, Sam." His voice went up, and he kind of giggled. "In a rotten little adobe hotel with cockroaches on the floor and flies on the wall. In a place like that, we found her, Sam. . . ." His mouth sounded as if it had got filled with rags. He was trying hard to get hold of himself. Poor, funny little Max with his roly-poly paunch, his pink, quivering jowls and his baby blue eyes. Good, kind-hearted Max. He said, "You shouldn't excite yourself, Sam. You take a pill, like the doctor gave you. You come over here, slow. To the *Cantina Blanca*. But slow, Sam. And not excited. . . ."

Yeah, I shouldn't excite myself. They'd found Kit. But I shouldn't excite myself.

I got off the bed like a guy who'd lived for a million years with insomnia. I took another pill and I walked downstairs and went across the bridge, into Mexico, where they'd found Kit at last. . . .

LIKE Max said, it was a dirty little place with white-washed, fly-specked walls and a dirt floor. A combination desk clerk and bartender stared at me as I went upstairs. The smell of baking tortillas and corn shucks seemed soaked into the very walls.

And then Kit's room upstairs where she'd played her most dramatic role: her own death scene.

The fat *señora* maid was rocking back and forth on a chair in a corner of the room,

wailing hysterically to herself, making the sign of the cross over and over. Max was standing at the foot of the bed with his baby blue eyes wide and his cheeks wet, knotting up a white silk handkerchief in his fat, shaking fingers. Russel Pierce, the Studio's detective, was prowling around the room.

And there was Kit. Kit Langford. Looking like a tired little girl who'd stretched out for a nap. Her left hand had fallen beside her cheek, and her fingers curled gently. She seemed to be smiling, like a bewildered child, patiently waiting for someone to explain this strange thing that had happened to her. Her black hair had fallen loosely like a mist around her face, and the left side of it was matted and sticky from the round, red hole in her left temple.

The room? It was a strange place for Kit Langford to die. Her suitcase was on the floor beside the bed, open. Three of her dresses hung behind a greasy curtain in a corner of the room. There was an ugly brown soap-stained table with a chipped enamel wash basin under a wavy mirror with a cracked corner. A little mahogany cross hung on the wall over the head of the bed.

A plain, severe room. Like a monastery. A nice twist for the publicity hacks. Kit Langford dies as she lived. Plain and simple and idealistically.

"We haven't notified anyone yet," Pierce said. "We've kept the maid in here. We thought we'd wait for you. Now I have to let the Mexican authorities know and the sheriff in Brownsville. . . ."

They stared at me. At Sam Jeffry. At the person who, it was said, loved Kit Langford the most. Sam Jeffry, the guy who made Kit Langford. Took her from the bottom, molded her out of nothing with his bare hands, into something even more than a great actress . . . into a symbol.

They stared at me and wondered why I didn't bawl. Why I didn't beat on the wall or grab Kit up in my arms.

They wondered why I just stood there

with my face stiff and set and my eyes dry. I whispered, "Gonzales Muntyan. . . ."

Then I hurried downstairs and out of the place. They yelled after me, but I got away from them. I walked down the dusty streets of the old Mexican village, searching for him. I knew I'd find him. I knew if Kit were here, he'd be here too. Not far away.

The dust curled around my shoes, and the tight pain came back in my chest so that I had trouble breathing. I found Muntyan in a dark little *cantina* in a squalid part of town.

The greasy, rat-faced little man was sitting at a table by himself, nursing a brandy. His face was twitching, and it had the color of a dirty lemon.

When he looked up and saw me, he spilled the brandy all over himself, and he stood up, tipping his chair over. He drew the back of his hand across his slack lips. "Jeffry . . . you. . . ."

I was smiling a little. I picked up a heavy beer bottle from the bar by its neck and smashed the end of it. Then I moved toward him, holding the ghastly weapon.

He stared at it with his eyes bulging, his bloodless lips twitching. He knew he was looking at death. He backed away until a wall stopped him, and he kept staring with hypnotized eyes.

He tried. Even a cornered rat will try. He reached under his coat and came out with a knife that slashed at my throat. I caught it, twisted it away. Then I jabbed with my other hand. The one with the jagged bottle.

It wasn't pretty, but it had to be done. When they found me, I was standing over him, panting. My clothes were bloody and torn, and the pain in my chest had almost stopped my breathing. But Gonzales Muntyan was dead. At my feet. In a bloody little puddle.

The Mexican officer caught my arms and pulled me away. Max Liebswich was standing there with his fat, good-natured face be-

fuddled and unhappy. And Russel Pierce, the private detective, looking as if he hated his job.

"I had to call the cops, Sam," he told me quietly. He shrugged. "Maybe you could explain away Gonzales Muntyan. You could say you killed him in self-defense. But," he said sadly, "not Kit. You found her first, this morning. You killed her, Sam. Then went back to your hotel.

"I found this under her bed." He held up a set of my private keys. "You must have dropped them this morning. You found her and killed her in a jealous rage, Sam. She'd come down here to marry Muntyan, and you couldn't stand that. If we go to your hotel room, we'll find the gun, won't we, Sam . . . ?"

They stood looking at me.

Max was blubbering. "How could you, Sammie? That sweet, good girl. Everyone in America will hate you, Sam!"

Everyone in America will hate you. . . .

I thought about me and Kit. About the things they didn't know about Kit. Nobody knew. I wondered what they'd say if I told them the truth. That Kit Langford had really died in a tiny New York apartment one Christmas night, twelve years ago. . . .

I HAD held her hand while she was dying, the real Kit Langford. It was pneumonia, and the doctor had told me she had only a few more hours. But she wouldn't give up to it. She held onto my hand tightly, and her eyes burned with a light I've never seen before. "I'm going to get over this, Sam," she whispered. "You mustn't worry. I'll start the show, just the way it's scheduled. And I'll be a great actress. I promise, Sam."

She looked out the window. As if she could see her name up in lights over the little theater on Broadway. It was there, all right. "Kit Langford," bright and shin-

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ing through the falling snow, just as we'd always planned.

But it would have to be taken down in the morning. Because in the morning, she'd be dead.

The radio was playing Christmas carols softly, and the snow was drifting against the window pane. And Kit died that way, without a murmur, holding onto my hand.

I walked through the snow later that night. Kit was still beside me. She'd always be. One of us couldn't die without part of the other dying too. And one of us couldn't stay alive without keeping a part of the other alive.

I thought about Kit and about what a funny little girl she'd been and what a funny reason she'd had for wanting to act.

Ask a girl why she wants to be on Broadway or go to Hollywood. Ask any of them. They'll tell you. Money, fame, excitement, success. With all of them it was the same.

But not with Kit.

Maybe because of the way we grew up. You learn a lot about despair and hopelessness, growing up in big city slums. You see kids with the spark of idealism and dreams that seem to come with you when you're born. And you see them old, even before they're out of their teens, with the spark stamped out, their eyes dead.

Kit saw them. Even more than I did. She saw them every day. And one night she saw them when they came out of the movies.

"I think it would be wonderful to be an actress, Sam," she'd said, her eyes all warm and shiny. "Did you see their faces? For a few hours, they weren't afraid or lonely or bitter.

"I think it would be wonderful to be an actress so you could make people forget about being afraid and remind them of their dreams. But you'd have to be a good actress. A sort of—of symbol. You know, the kind of person they really wanted to be . . . and didn't quite manage."

Yeah, all right. She was a crazy kid.

I'll give you that. I thought so, too. I wanted to be a big shot as much as Kit. But with me it was money and decent living. I wanted to eat good food and dress in something other than second-hand clothes, and I wanted to drive a big car and yell at the dirty little kids playing in the streets, the way guys in big cars used to yell at me.

I'm not throwing any roses at me, Sam Jeffry.

Maybe it was because Kit was a dreamer, and I was materialistic. Maybe it was fate. Anyway, I got to the top first. After five years of starving, I hit Broadway with a play. Then another.

Kit was getting walk-on parts in plays occasionally and singing six nights a week in a basement joint in the Village so she could eat. But she was good. I knew all she needed was a break. When I wrote my third play, there was a part in it for Kit. They loved her in it. In the next one, she got the lead and her name up in lights.

Just the way she'd always dreamed.

But she didn't make it. She died of pneumonia a week before it opened, on Christmas night. And I walked through the snow and wondered why they ever built this world in the first place.

I guess I got drunk that night, in a cold, numb sort of way. I made enough bars. I felt scared and alone with Kit gone, and I wanted people around me.

And then I saw Kit. She wasn't dead at all! She was warm and alive and singing in her sweet, husky voice with the catch in it. I didn't know where I was or what time it was. Near dawn, I suppose. I saw her through a wavy haze, and she looked perfectly beautiful.

I kind of sobbed in my throat, and I pushed through the smoke and the crowd, a hatless guy with snow melting in his hair, his soggy overcoat unbuttoned. I went up to her and tried to take her in my arms. I was crying like a kid. "I knew you couldn't be dead, Kit. I knew they wouldn't let anyone like you be dead. . . ."

I was stirring up a commotion. Somebody grabbed my arm and tried to drag me off the floor. Kit was staring at me as if she'd never seen me before. I didn't understand it at all. I couldn't see why they wouldn't let me hold Kit. Why she looked at me that way—as if I were a stranger.

And then I got it.

It took a while to make them believe I wasn't just another drunk on the make. After I spilled enough words around and shoved a few ten-dollar bills into the right hands, they let me go back to the girl's dressing room.

Maybe I was a little crazy, but I wasn't drunk any more. I kept thinking about what Kit had wanted more than anything in the world and how she'd said, with that strange light in her eyes, "*I won't die, Sam. I'll be a great actress, just the way we planned. I promise, Sam.*"

So I talked with this girl. I can't even remember her real name—Louise something—because, from that night onward, for the past twelve years, she has been Kit Langford.

IT WAS one of those things that happens once in a million. She was Kit's perfect double, an identical twin. Kit wasn't well known yet, and so I knew we could get away with it. I'd hush up Kit's death. And the play would go right on with this girl in Kit's part.

Day and night I coached her. I molded her into the person Kit wanted to be. Not inside really—you couldn't change her there—but outside, for the world to see and love.

Inside, she was as different from Kit as she was like her in appearance. . . .

I can't remember all the jams I got her out of. Like the time I dragged her out of a guy's apartment two jumps ahead of the cops. The man's wife had taken poison because of Kit—this new Kit—and the police were investigating.

That scared her. She'd tasted fame and

money, and she liked it. She got down on her knees and begged for another chance.

"This is the way it's going to be," I told her. "We're going to Hollywood. I have a part for you in a picture. But you're going to play a part off the screen, too. No yachting parties, no drinking, no dope. While the rest of them are making headlines with their divorces, you'll be helping out some new charity. The sweet sincere girl who



Don't Miss:

THE BLONDE DIES TWICE!

By Francis K. Allan

When his first wife came back from the grave to make a shambles of his life, Eddie figured he had a perfect right to send her right back where she came from!

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didn't let success go to her head—that's you," I told her through my teeth.

It was a struggle. Mess after mess I hushed up. Kit Langford became the most-loved girl on the screen. And I worked twenty-four hours a day to keep up the illusion. Worked until the doctor told me my heart was going to stop ticking one day soon if I didn't take a complete rest.

But I turned her into the real Kit, on the surface. It hurt me to look at her, she was so much like my dead Kit. At times, even I forgot it was just a game we were playing. A serious, deadly game.

The columnists said I would marry Kit soon. Then she began seeing this Gonzales Muntyan. She denied any romantic connection, but they were together a great deal, and she had a strained, tense look.

Then, one night, three days ago, Kit Langford disappeared. She walked off the set one night and vanished. Gonzales Muntyan disappeared too. We traced her down here to Brownsville. That was the whole story.

Well, almost the whole story.

We were standing in the little dirt-floor Matamores *cantina* now, beside the body of Gonzales Muntyan. They were all looking at me in that unhappy way. Max Liebschitz's blue eyes were incredulous, horror-stricken, and he kept mumbling to himself, "How could anyone harm a hair on that sweet girl's head?" Even the hard-boiled private detective, Russel Pierce was looking at me as if I were disgusting.

Everyone in America will hate you. . . .

That's what Max had said a moment before. He was right. They'd hate the man who killed Kit Langford.

I nodded slowly, wearily. I felt a million years old. "Yes, Pierce. I found her. Early this morning. Like you say, the gun is up in my hotel room. I killed her."

SO WE walked out of the place and that was the story that made the headlines in every newspaper in the country, from big

New York dailies down to Oklahoma country weeklies. And, as Max prophesied, they hated me.

But it was better that way. Better for them than to know the truth.

Because if they had known how Kit Langford really died, the symbol I had built her into would have become a mockery. Cynics would have pointed to her with a bitter smile and said, "See?" And the hopes and dreams she'd stirred would have died with her.

Kit wasn't murdered. She committed suicide. She'd gotten herself into an ugly dope racket the year before. Through her, dope had been peddled to the very high school kids who went to see her pictures. Gonzales Muntyan had known about the deal. Later, he'd come to Hollywood for blackmail. He'd threatened to expose her whole ugly part in the racket unless she paid off. He bled her white. He'd come down here to Brownsville, then had wired her for more money. But she couldn't raise it. She'd come here to plead with him. But you don't make a bargain with a rat like Muntyan. She knew everything was folding up around her. Because of the way we'd built her personality, her career would be destroyed. She couldn't bear the thought of poverty and a prison term. So she killed herself.

I found her that morning. I planted my keys in the room, took the gun with me. But I had to silence Muntyan. He would have been questioned when they found Kit, and I knew the little rat would talk his head off.

That's the real story of Kit Langford. And, like I say, it's better for them to hate Sam Jeffry and love the memory of Kit Langford.

Sam Jeffry isn't anybody.

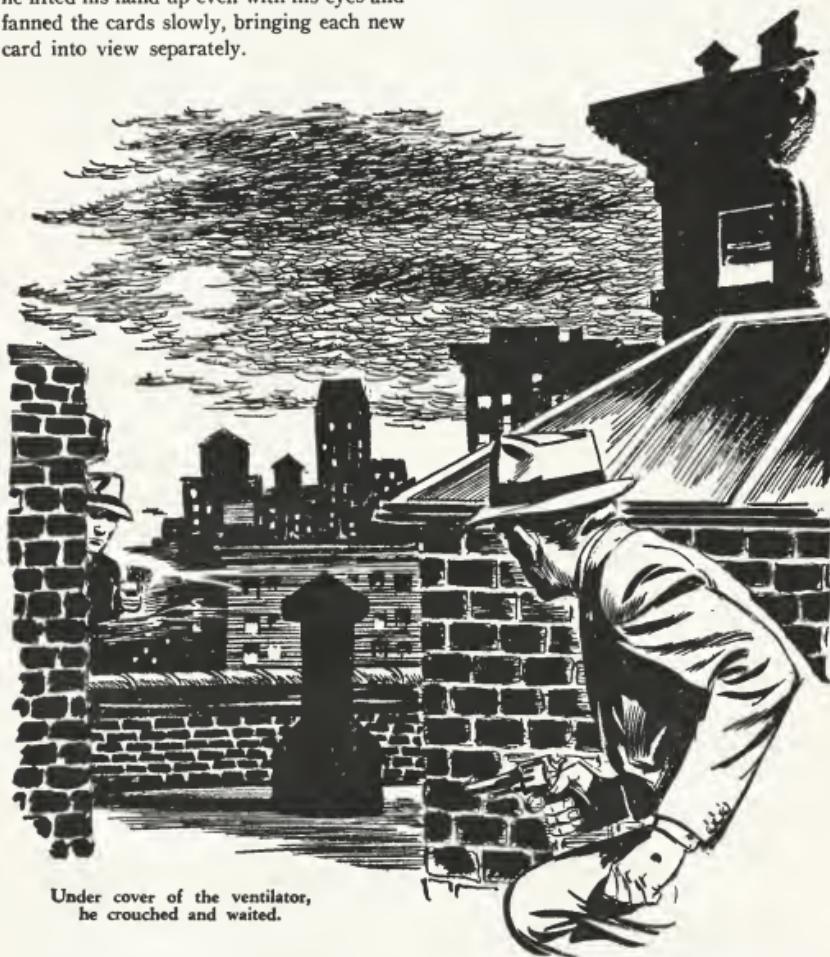
My ticker isn't going to hold out long enough for them to bring me to trial. But that's the way I want it. Because then I'll be with the real Kit Langford . . . the greatest actress who never lived!

• • •

- TIME TO KILL -

O'CONNOR said, "I'll take three." He shuffled three and picked up the replacements that Deming flipped off the deck. Slumping in his chair a little, he lifted his hand up even with his eyes and fanned the cards slowly, bringing each new card into view separately.

By **FLETCHER
FLORA**



Under cover of the ventilator,
he crouched and waited.

How can you all sit there, Deming's nerves screamed, playing poker as if you cared? Any minute, any hour, a man will walk into a trap—a man that we must kill!

"Two," Sigman said.

O'Connor glanced quickly at Sigman from under heavy lids. "You oughtn't hold a kicker," he said. "You're bucking the percentages."

Sigman looked at his cards fast and slipped them on the bottom of his hands. He laid the hand on the table in front of him.

"If you think I'm holding a kicker," he said, "you can always bet on it."

"Poker's figured on the percentages," O'Connor said. "Play them and you win in the long run."

Deming helped himself. Under the bluish cast of the single bulb burning overhead, his young face looked thin and tight. A shadow of black beard lay on his cheeks.

"One to the dealer," he said. He flicked a corner of the card with a thumb nail and saw that he'd filled his house. What luck he'd had! Straights, flushes, full houses. All for matches. He laid his cards face down on the table and leaned back. He and Sigman looked at O'Connor.

At the window, Czynowski said, "There's a guy going in."

O'Connor counted twenty matches and pushed them to the center. "What's he look like? This oughtn't scare your three of a kind any, Siggy."

Sigman left his cards on the table. "The hell with it," he said.

"Snap brim hat, topcoat," Czynowski said. "He looks too short. Too much weight."

The window had a venetian blind, lowered and closed. A dark drape was pulled across behind the blind. Czynowski stood to one side of the window, lifting the drape a thin crack for his eye. From there he could get a knife's edge of vision past the edge of the blind.

"The weight could be padding," O'Connor said. "Twenty to you, kid."

Deming's nerves were screaming. He was building up high voltage sitting in a hard chair looking at pasteboards for

matches. He wanted to throw in his hand and move around some. But he didn't. He didn't, because he had a full house, and when you have a full house you play it for all it's worth. Even for matches. Maybe it's a principle.

He counted twenty and twenty.

"Raise," he said.

O'Connor looked at his cards, sucking in his cheeks until his lips were pursed like a cupid's. With the hand that wasn't holding the cards, he fingered his pile of matches. Big deal. As if they were blue chips at fifty per. With O'Connor, it was principle.

"Nuts," he said. "It's your night, kid. Here's openers." He showed a pair of Ladies and leaned back, balanced on the rear legs of his chair. The leather strap of his holster stretched tight diagonally across his thick chest, and a black automatic was revealed under his armpit.

"How about some coffee?" Sigman said. He got up and moved to a pot on a hot plate. Deming got up, too, stretching, easing the tension of muscles and nerves.

"If it's him," Czynowski said, "Kelly ought to be calling."

"If he's awake," Deming said.

O'Connor applied a match to the mangled remains of a cold cigar, looking up at Deming through the flame. "Don't worry about Kelly, kid," he said softly. "Don't worry about Kelly at all."

IN A corner of the room, the telephone began to ring shrilly. The sound was grating to Deming's nerves. Czynowski turned at the window, letting the drape slip from his fingers. Everyone looked at O'Connor, who remained as he was, rocked back in the chair, looking at Deming through flame. But he wasn't seeing Deming now. After a moment, he dropped the match on the table and went over to the phone. Under the surveillance of three pairs of eyes, he spoke briefly to grunts and hung up.

"Kelly, all right," he said. "The guy went into the room."

Czynowski stepped away from the window, relief in his eyes and in his voice as he spoke, as if the waiting had been worse than what remained to be done.

"It's him," he said. "And time, too. High time."

O'Connor stretched, reaching high with both arms, rising onto his toes. His eyes had gone strangely still, glinting with a dream. "Maybe. Maybe not. It's dark in the hall up there. Kelly couldn't be sure."

The coffee had begun to boil, and the smell of it was in the room. Sigman reached out and jerked the plug of the hot plate.

"Let's find out," he said.

O'Connor went over to his chair and shrugged into his coat. He looked for a moment at the soggy butt of his cigar and let it drop into an overloaded ash tray on the table.

"No hurry," he said dreamily. "Wirt's at the bottom of the fire escape in the court. Kleig's in the alley. Kelly's in the room across the hall. Maybe it's Connie, and probably it is. If it is, he won't go anywhere. He's there for us, like a rat in a trap, and we'll take him in our own good time. Drink your coffee, Siggy."

Sigman jerked his shoulders savagely and fumbled for a cigarette.

"To hell with the coffee," he said.

Deming watched O'Connor, a little ashamed of the rapid pounding of his heart, the almost painful throbbing of the pulse in his throat. O'Connor was a tough old veteran. He'd seen a lot of this kind of stuff. He played the game as Deming's old man had played checkers, setting his traps and waiting, moving in for the kill without hurry or fuss.

Connie, Deming thought. O'Connor called him Connie. Not Conrad Riebeau, which is his full name, nor even Riebeau alone, which would seem more appropriate, but just Connie. The diminutive. The little name of affection. That's the way the game

is played. You wait thirty-six hours in a room playing poker for matches. You wait for a killer who kills for hire, and probably in his heart for fun, and who has finally made the mistake of killing a cop under the eyes of a witness with the guts to talk. You wait the thirty-six hours to take him dead or alive in a trap well set, and in your own heart you hope that you take him dead. So you stretch, and you smile, and you call him Connie, the pet diminutive, and you hope to see his blood in a matter of minutes.

"What I can't understand," Deming said, "is how you knew he'd come. You said he'd come to see a woman in that room up there, but it doesn't stand to reason. Whatever he is, he's no fool, and he's hot for murder, and it doesn't stand to reason that he'd smoke out for any woman on earth."

O'Connor smiled as if he were smiling to himself, and an element of dreaminess came into the smile.

"I knew he'd come," he said. "I knew, because I know Connie Riebeau. Oh, I know him like I know the palm of my hand. He's a sleek, smooth prince of a killer. He's killed for hire, and he's killed for the hell of it, and always with the brains to keep himself clean. But now he's mine. He's mine in a room with the one woman who could bring him out, and I'll take him dead if there's any justice."

He stopped talking, staring across at Deming without focus, and suddenly he looked what he was. An old man. A tired man. A tired old cop with years of tough work behind him.

"I've waited a long time for Connie," he said. "A long, long time."

Sigman cursed and ground his cigarette under an angry heel. "Let's move," he said. "Let's get the hell over there."

O'Connor's eyes, turned to Sigman, came sharply to focus. He laughed. "Sure, Siggy, sure. We're going now. Right now."

They went, the four of them, down to the narrow street between old buildings. They walked under a strip of starless sky "with

the moon a sickly smear behind an overcast. Besides them, nothing lived in the street, except the wind, and there was no sound, except the sound of wind-touched things—the scurrying rustle of a newspaper, the rattle of a garbage can. It was cold. A few flakes of snow fell on the quiet street.

In the deep shadow of the building from which they emerged, they stopped, and O'Connor spoke tersely.

"Czynowski, join Wirt in the court. You'll have to go around to the alley and in the rear. Siggy, you go with Czynowski, but stop with Kleig in the alley." He paused, looking up at Deming, his lips drawn back off his teeth in a stiff grin. "You're a big kid, Deming. Big and tough. Besides, you're riding your luck. You'll come with me."

Czynowski and Signan moved away, and O'Connor stood quietly, his head thrown back, staring up at the dark building across the street.

"The room's toward the rear," he said. "No view of the street."

He crossed the sidewalk and stepped off, Deming at his heels. In Deming's ears, the hollow sound of their heels on the rough brick of the old street had the cadence of a death march. He wondered wryly how long a man could ride his luck before he fell off. Maybe you use it up filling your house from a deck of cards for matches. Maybe, when you need it for bigger things, you find there's none left. He was gratified that his pulse was now normal. What he felt was no more than a realistic acceptance of his part in what seemed an inevitable order of events.

THEY went up two flights of ancient stairs to the third floor hall. Up there, the cold was still and heavy and almost tangible. It wrapped itself around Deming like a clammy hand. The place was like a morgue, as if, behind closed doors, nameless' corpses awaited their final, impersonal

disposition. Deming twisted his stiff lips into an ironic smile, wishing that he had no more than a corpse or two to concern him. Behind one of those doors, caught in O'Connor's patient trap, was the most dangerous of all wild animals—a human killer.

They walked the old boards cautiously, without sound. Down the hall, a door swung inward with a whisper of hinges, and Kelly, a blocky shadow, slipped into the hall to confront them. He gestured at the closed door across the hall, and O'Connor nodded. Deming saw that O'Connor's automatic had appeared as if by magic in O'Connor's hand. Strange, Deming thought. He hadn't seen O'Connor reach for the gun at all.

Moving in on the indicated door, O'Connor crowded the wall and thumbed Deming behind him. Kelly flattened himself against the wall on the other side of the door. O'Connor's heavy fist, hammering the flimsy panel, was a sudden violation of the suspended silence. His voice, raised above the racket of his pounding, retained, somehow, for all its volume, its timbre of calmness.

"Okay, Connie. We've got you nailed. Don't make trouble for yourself, boy."

Inside the room, silence. Silence for a long moment, while all sound and motion hung suspended. Then the expected, shocking explosion and the ripping of the panel where O'Connor's hand had been a moment before. O'Connor laughed exultantly and sent a slug smashing into the old lock of the door.

"It's dead he wants to come," he shouted, "and it's dead we'll bring him!"

Beyond the door, a window screeched in its sash. Another slug ripped through the panel, and farther away, below in the court, there were a series of explosions.

"He's on the fire escape," O'Connor said. "Get the door down!"

Deming found himself throwing his two hundred pounds against the door. He felt the barrier give, hang for a second on an

edge of metal, and then crash inward. He plunged into the room in a head-long sprawl, getting a blurred impression of curtains billowing at a window, of a seated woman staring at him with wide, stricken eyes. Then he was through the window.

On the sharp-angled steps a floor below, Czynowski lifted a face startling white in sudden illumination from the window beside him. "The roof! He went for the roof!"

From a small platform, an iron ladder went up on the perpendicular. Gun in hand, Deming took it fast, throwing himself without thinking over the parapet above. The vicious whine of a ricochet sliced into his ears. A splinter of brick ripped his cheek. He hit on a shoulder on tar and gravel and rolled to his feet, driving for the black shape of a ventilator yards away. Beyond him, another slug ricocheted off the brick.

The shots had come from the shadow of a chimney across the roof. Under cover of the ventilator, Deming crouched and waited. There was movement at the edge of the brick mass, shadow slipping within shadow, and he fired once. The shadow quieted.

Then he became aware of other movement. Not at the chimney, but wide of it and beyond it. The flat expanse of roof seemed to stir and break. A trap door lifted slowly, inch by patient inch. And Deming realized suddenly that O'Connor had not followed him into the room below and onto the fire escape. Quickly, for diversion, he snapped two slugs in the direction of the chimney, and the small movement of the roof erupted in decisive violence. Orange tongues licked the darkness, and the crash of O'Connor's gun repeated itself.

Deming stood up. There was a wild, uncontrolled singing in his head. He felt a little sick to his stomach, and his cheek burned like fire. Carefully, spacing his feet wide, he walked over to the chimney.

O'Connor was standing there beside the body of Connie Riebeau. If he was aware

of Deming, he gave no sign. It was as if he and Connie were up there on the roof alone. Deming had the sudden disquieting feeling that he was intruding on a fantastic and esoteric ceremony.

"Good-by, Connie boy," O'Connor said in a weird, light tone of exultation.

Turning, Deming found his way to the trap door and down. In the hall below, he walked back to the room from which Connie Riebeau had fled. The woman was still there, sitting motionless in her chair. She had a thin, drawn face with big, lifeless eyes. They stared at each other, she and Deming, without speaking. Deming saw now that the woman's chair was equipped with wheels. A light blanket covered the woman's legs.

Behind Deming, O'Connor spoke harshly. "Connie's dead as those he killed."

He was speaking to the woman, but she didn't answer. She didn't even look at him. Tears gathered slowly in the dead eyes and spilled over onto the worn cheeks. Tears without sound. Tears for a killer who would inspire no other grief than this.

Deming moved again, out into the hall past O'Connor, who, following, said, "I'll call the meat wagon."

He went into Kelly's room and used the phone. When he came out, Deming said, "That woman in there. She's crippled."

"Yeah," O'Connor said. "Paralyzed." "What's she to Riebeau?"

"She was Connie's wife," O'Connor said. "That's how I knew Connie would come. She was isolated here. No friends. No money. No one to take care of her. Connie had to come."

"Look," Deming said, "Connie was a born killer. A torpedo for hire. A guy who had no right to live. You telling me he risked his life to come back here for a woman? A crippled woman?"

O'Connor stood quietly, looking over Deming's shoulder at nothing, his eyes carefully blank. "Yeah," he said. "Wouldn't anybody?"

* * *

TOAST THE POISON PRINCESS!

If Judy was not the killer they said she was, she'd break both my pride and my heart. But if she actually was a murderer, then, brother, I'd be her favorite corpse!

I LIT a cigarette, put my feet on the desk, and looked around the office. It wasn't impressive. The furniture had been second-hand a long time ago. The green paint of the sagging filing cabinet was chipped and smeared. The gilt lettering on the glass door was dingy. It announced to an uninterested world:

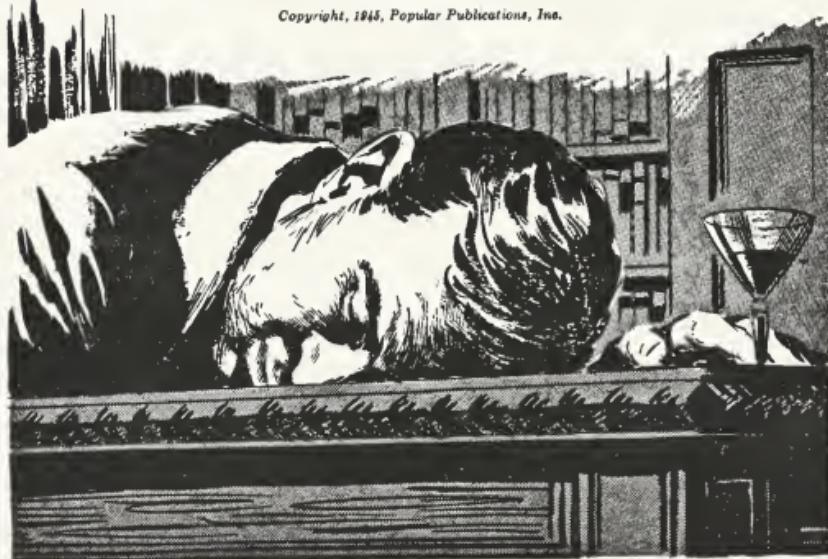
A. DASHER PRIVATE INVESTIGATIONS

I decided that the fiction writers have

built up a picture of private shamuses as false as McCarthy's picture of the State Department. In all my life I have never heard of one dashing in, like the rescuing Marines, and pinching the least likely murder suspect under the awed and red noses of the police. What fees there were came invariably from sordid divorce evidence, negotiations with the underworld over the return of stolen jewelry, and various other drab and unromantic matters.

The door opened, and I swung my feet

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By D. L. CHAMPION



Judy Morehead stood in the doorway, her face the color of snow. "Of course my prints are on the glass," she said.

**Exciting, Suspense-
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to the floor. There was a girl in the room and a faint odor of jasmine. She was brunette, and about twenty-three years old. She wore a purple dress, which did nothing whatever to conceal how attractive she was, and an idiotic hat, perched on the side of her head like a drunken bird.

She looked at me with a pair of frank, brown eyes and said without preamble, "I'm Judy Morehead."

I looked back at her with a faint sense of excitement, bowed, and said, "How do you do, Miss Morehead?"

"Mr. Dasher," she said, "I have been recommended to you. I have heard some things about you."

I said, making conversation, "Pleasant things, I trust."

She smiled faintly. "On the contrary. I have heard that you are an opportunist who doesn't examine the antecedents of a dollar too carefully. That you are adverse neither to compounding a felony nor blackmail, provided the profit is large enough to compensate for the risk."

I glanced down at my wrist watch. I thought rapidly and said, "Shall we discuss this over a cocktail?"

She shook her head. "No, thank you. I have heard that about you, too."

"Have you heard about me kicking dogs?" I said. "Or the clever scheme I've perfected for swindling little children out of their ice cream money?"

She didn't smile. She said, "There's a handsome fee in this, Mr. Dasher. Moreover, you may have to break a law or two in order to prove what I want you to prove."

"Very well," I said. "Tell me about it."

"Aren't you going to ask how much?"

I sighed. "All right. How much?"

"Five hundred in cash to start. And, if you do a good job, anything more within reason. The principal involved is a rich man."

"Well, tell me about it."

She lit a cigarette with a silver lighter and sat on the edge of the desk. She said,

"My fiancé is in Korea. His name is Worth. Robert Worth. He was the only heir of his father, Robert Worth, Senior. You may have heard of him."

I had done even better than hear of Robert Worth, Senior. But all I said was, "I remember. Steel, wasn't it?"

"And a lot of other things. Bob always ran his own affairs before he went off to fight for MacArthur. Then he gave a power of attorney to a dear friend of his father's. A man named Thorpe. Thorpe is handling the vast estate right now. I think he's a crook."

"And you want me to prove it?"

She nodded. "Thorpe lives out at the Worth estate, along with Bob's aunt and her grandson, Bob's cousin. She doesn't approve of me. Nevertheless, she agrees that Thorpe is a thief. She knows that I have come here to see you about it."

"Have you any sound reasons for believing this Thorpe isn't honest? Or is it all feminine intuition?"

"I have my reasons. He lives far beyond his income. He wasn't a rich man when Bob went away. Now, he spends a fortune on women and gambling. Moreover, the aunt, Sadie, overheard him tell someone on the telephone that if Bob was away another year, he—Thorpe—would never have to worry about money again as long as he lived."

I considered this for a moment. But somehow my concentration failed me. My mind wandered. I fear it wandered a great distance and to a most unpleasant scene.

"Well," said Judy Morehead, "what about it?"

IJERKED myself back to reality. "Let's put it this way," I said. "Since you intend to marry Worth, some day all that estate will be at least partly yours. If he dies before you, you'll quite likely get it all. In the meantime, if he gets killed before your marriage, the dough will probably go to Aunt Sadie or her grandson.

So, of course, she would be interested in your not marrying Worth. But she would like to get Thorpe out of the way. Thorpe, on the other hand, if he is speculating, would be in the clear if Worth gets knocked off by a Red sniper. It looks to me as if the vultures are quarreling before the corpse has lain down."

She flushed and bit her lip. "You've made a good guess. It seems that way to others, as well. All I can say is that if you accept my offer, anything you may turn up which redounds against me you are quite free to use."

I stood up and took my hat from the leaning tree. I put it on and said, "Under those circumstances, I accept. Let's go out and talk to Thorpe and Aunt Sadie. It isn't necessary to tell them who I am."

We went out into the hall together. Half-way to the elevator, a portly man came into view around the corner of the corridor. He wore a light brown suit and a tie green enough to make an Irishman salute. Across his ample stomach was a heavy golden watch chain.

He slowed up as he saw us and started to speak. I cut him off.

"Later, Arthur," I told him. "Wait for me in the office. I'll either come back later, or phone."

He nodded, stared with frank admiration at the girl, and waddled off down the hall. We got into the elevator and went down to the street.

We found a taxi, climbed in. Judy Morehead gave an address to the driver. She fumbled for a moment in her capacious bag and withdrew a roll of bills. These she put in my hand. I blinked and said, "What's this?"

"Your fee, of course. I promised you five hundred in cash."

I said, "Of course," and stowed the cash away in my wallet.

She said, "I'll introduce you to Thorpe as an old friend of Bob's who's just come to town. After that you're on your own.

You can probably trail him, or break into his desk and look the papers over."

"You sound very vague about the procedure."

"I'm not a detective," she said. "I'm not supposed to know about these things. From what I've heard of you, you are."

"Oh, sure," I murmured. "Sure. Just leave it all to me."

We rode out beyond the town limits in silence. I watched the girl furtively out of the corner of my eye. I thought of at least twenty questions I would have liked to ask her. But I asked none at all.

The Worth estate, it seemed, abutted a body of water known as Silver Lake. It was a good mile and a half in diameter. The far side, which was visible as the lodge keeper admitted us through a pair of wrought-iron gates, was given over to a number of summer bungalows.

The house was an old fashioned colonial affair upon which had been built a brick addition, rendering it an architectural monstrosity. Our cab deposited us beneath the two big white pillars before the original entrance to the house, and a moment later we were admitted by an ancient Negro butler.

He smiled at Judy Morehead, whispered, "Something's going on, miss. They're all in the wing where Mr. Thorpe has his office. We servants have been told to keep out."

I FOLLOWED the girl into the house. She led me through a vast living room into a high-ceilinged hall. She stopped before a door which, I gathered, led to the brick adjunct. She tried the knob. The door apparently was locked.

A voice, high and shrill, said, "Who is it?"

"Judy."

There was a slight pause and the sound of a bolt being drawn. Then the door was opened.

On the other side of it was the most

unpleasant youngster I had ever beheld. He was about fourteen, and incredibly fat. The side of his face was smeared with chocolate, and he had a comic magazine tucked under his chubby arm. He eyed Judy with positive malice. He said, "You got one hell of a gall. I told you before not to play around at all with my dark room stuff."

"Now, Anthony," said Judy. "I haven't touched any of your things."

"No?" Anthony said unpleasantly. "Grandmother says you have. And she ain't the only one who says so." He took a piece of candy from his pocket, thrust it into his mouth, and chewed with a loud noise. "Oh, boy, what's going to happen to you!"

He pattered along behind us as I followed Judy into the room beyond the foyer where Anthony had met us. It was a large chamber, furnished more like the reception room to an office than something in a private house.

The chairs were of brown leather, cigarette trays were placed advantageously about the heavy rug, and the room was occupied by two people. One of them, obviously Aunt Sadie, seemed incredibly old.

Her unkempt, gray hair fell down in wisps upon an over-rouged face. Her eyes were pale blue and looked like the eyes of a corpse. Her face was wrinkled parchment. She sat with a pair of gnarled hands folded in her lap and regarded Judy with positive hatred.

"Well," she said, "I never thought you'd fare come back." She jerked her head toward the second occupant of the room, a man of about fifty, with an erect body and a pair of clear eyes. "This is Lieutenant Fortin."

Judy nodded to him. She said, nettled, "What do you mean you thought I wouldn't come back? You knew quite well I went downtown to—well, you knew why I went downtown."

"Perhaps you don't understand," said

Sadie Worth. "Lieutenant Fortin is of the police."

"The police? Why is he here?"

"To make the pinch, baby," said Fortin in flat nasal tones.

"I didn't want a scandal, if it could be helped," said Sadie Worth. "So, I sent for Fortin. He's an old friend of the family."

Judy Morehead blinked. "Do you mean I'm to be arrested? For what?"

"Murder," said Fortin unemotionally. "For the murder of James Thorpe."

The girl turned her head and looked at me. There was a desperate quality in her glance. She forgot in that tense moment that I was supposed to be incognito.

"Mr. Dasher," she said sharply, "this is ridiculous!"

At the mention of the name Fortin came to point like a bird dog.

"Dasher?" he said. "Well, well, funny I've never run into you around town. I've heard of you. And nothing good. The department would hardly consider you a character witness for a lady accused of first-degree murder."

"But," said Judy Morehead, "Mr. Thorpe was all right when I left here this morning."

"He sure was," said Fortin. "He was all right until he emptied that glass of peach brandy and cyanide that you so thoughtfully poured out for him."

Judy Morehead shot me another glance. There was something in her expression which made me feel like Galahad. That had never happened to me before.

I cleared my throat. I said, "Lieutenant, if you're going to make a pinch, you're going to make one. No one can stop you. I suppose you'll call your headquarters first. In the meantime, would you mind telling us just what happened?"

"Not at all," said Fortin in his even monotone. He stood up. He crossed the room and opened a door. "Go right in," he added, as casually as if he were offering me a drink.

I WENT in. The room was twice as large as the one which I had just quitted. Wide French windows opened out on to a spacious lawn, and the lake gleamed in the background. In the center of the room stood a vast mahogany desk. Seated at it, his face flat on the desk blotter was a man. On his left, on the blotter, was a half-emptied glass.

"Thorpe," said Fortin, gesturing toward the corpse. "James Thorpe, Esquire. Now a corpse, murdered by Miss Judith Morehead for reasons which will be most apparent at the inquest."

"Could I know them now?"

He regarded me sharply for a moment, then shrugged. "Why not? Everyone else will, when the morning papers hit the stands."

He took a cigar from the breast pocket of his coat, bit off the end, and struck a kitchen match with his thumbnail.

He said, "This dame figured Thorpe was robbing Worth, whom she was going to marry. Maybe he was. Maybe he wasn't. Anyway, she thought so. She thought, too, that he was frittering away a lot of dough which would eventually be hers if she played her cards right. So she poisoned him. She did it dumb. All women murderers do. She figured it might look like suicide, when a review of his books showed he was cheating. Get it? He cheated, got conscience-stricken, and knocked himself off. That's what she figured. But as I say, she did it so damned dumb."

"Keep talking." I told him.

"Well, it seems that this Thorpe had a habit of drinking peach brandy and soda." Here Fortin shuddered in the manner of a straight bourbon man. "Off in the next room, the one to the left here, is a small bar. Beyond this is the kid's dark room. He's a camera nut. This morning Thorpe had a backache or something. He asked this Judy to get him his peach brandy. We have witnesses to this. She did it. She went beyond the bar and dropped some

cyanide from the dark room into the glass, as well. As I say, we have witnesses, and her prints are doubtless where you'd expect on the glass."

Judy Morehead stood in the doorway. Her face was the color of bleached snow. She said, "Of course my fingerprints are on the glass. Of course I got him the brandy when he asked me to. But I put no poison in it."

"It's odd," said Fortin, "that this was the only time he'd ever asked you to get the drink for him. Wasn't it?"

The girl said, "Yes," in a low voice.

"And didn't you once say to Sadie Worth that you'd like to poison him?"

"I think I said he should be poisoned if he was robbing Bob."

Fortin looked at me and spread his palms. "That's enough for now," he said. "Though doubtless, I'll pick up some more evidence as I go along."

Judy Morehead said in a strangulated voice, "God, I don't want to go to jail. Even if it's only for not much more than a few weeks, until I can—"

"It'll be only for a few weeks," said Fortin, his voice as flat as sheet rock, "if they decided to hang you. If not, it will probably be for life."

She caught my eye. She wore the expression of a starving dog pleading for a bone. I drew a deep breath and closed my eyes. My mind wandered again. When I opened my eyes I knew what I had to do.

Fortin was standing by the French windows, staring out at the glittering lake. He said, "I'll call up now for some finger-print men and the technical boys. They'll probably clinch it."

As he turned around and took a step in the direction of the telephone on the desk, I saw the bulge in his coat which outlined what could only have been a shoulder holster. I moved toward him. I knew he was tough. But he was also fifty. I was twenty-nine.

CHAPTER TWO

Now I Lay Me Down to Fry

MY SWINGING right knocked him to the floor, dazed him sufficiently for me to take his Police Special with no trouble at all. Armed I went into the anteroom. I said, "Sadie. You, too, brat. Come in here."

Sadie stared at the gun, muttered something, and came into the room. The brat hesitated a little until I helped him along with a kick to the rear. Judy regarded me, speechless. On the floor Fortin opened his eyes.

"Dasher," he said, "I'm mildly astonished."

He got to his feet, neither malice nor anger in his face. He sighed and sat down. "Dasher," he said, "are you crazy, as well as crooked? I know you're a man who'll take a chance if the price is right. Is she paying you enough to have you picked up as an accessory to murder?"

"No," I said. I turned to Judy. "Is there somewhere that we can lock these three up? I need a little time. I need them out of the way for at least an hour and a half."

"There's a closet off the bar, with no window in it. It's big enough. But the servants—"

"They've already been told not to come in. They'll doubtless hold off for an hour or so."

"Dasher," said Fortin, "listen to me. There's one thing we regular coppers have which crooks don't. Even private dicks like yourself don't."

"What is it?"

"Patience. We can wait. Months, years, if necessary. And get paid every week while we're doing it. You can't, Dasher. We're bound to get you, and you can't make a decent living while you're under cover. Is she paying you enough to live for the rest of your life, say, in Costa Rica?"

"No," I said.

"Well, what do you think of what I've just said?"

"I'm impressed," I said quite honestly. "Judy, open the closet door."

She crossed the room, disappeared for a moment, and said, "It's ready. I doubt if anyone will hear any sound from here, either."

"Fortin," said Aunt Sadie, "stop them. They can't do this, you know."

"As long as they have my gun," said Fortin, "they can do it."

I jerked my head in the direction of the closet. Fortin stood up with a sigh. He escorted Sadie toward it. I dragged the howling Anthony along in the rear. I slammed the door on the three of them and locked it. I said to the girl, "Have you any cash?"

"Only a few dollars. Why?"

"We'll need some."

"You have the five hundred I gave you."

"We'll need more than that. Is there anything in Thorpe's desk?"

She glanced at the corpse, shuddered, then looked away. "Certainly not cash. Maybe bonds or something."

"Those'll do."

I ripped open the drawers. I found thirty shares of Union Pacific. I said, "We'll take these."

"How can you dispose of them?"

"There are ways," I said.

As we turned toward the door I heard a mighty howl from the closet. Little Anthony wasn't taking his incarceration lightly.

"Hush," said Aunt Sadie. "Crying will get you nowhere. I shall pray."

As I closed the office door behind me I heard Anthony's fat fists pounding futilely on the closet walls. Aunt Sadie's voice rose as an obligato, choosing the less mundane method of invoking the aid of heaven.

As we left the house, we told the butler that Sadie's orders were that she should remaind undisturbed. We walked through the iron gates and about a quarter of a

mile up the road came upon a taxicab.
"I'll drop you at the Royal Bar," I said,
"Wait there for me. I won't be long."

She half turned in her seat and faced me directly. "Look," she said, "I don't get it. Why are you doing this for me? As Fortin said, five hundred dollars isn't enough for this."

"Maybe," I said slowly. "Then again, maybe you didn't kill Thorpe."

"Good Lord, did you think I had?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. I'm going to find out."

She bristled at that. "Does it matter particularly what *you* think?"

I met her gaze steadily. "Yes," I said. "It matters a great deal whether or not I believe you killed Thorpe. Now, leave it there for the time being."

WE DROVE in silence for some time. My mind was working harder than it ever had in all my life before. I said at last, "Give me the name of a town. A small town. Not too accessible. At least five hundred miles from here."

"Marion," she said. "Marion, Kansas. I have a cousin there. Why?"

"Marion," I said. "That'll do."

I dropped her off at the Royal Bar; then I disposed of Worth's stock. A few minutes later I went back to the office.

Arthur still sat there, indolent as a fat cat. He eyed me for a silent moment, then said, "I'm surprised you're back. That was a classy dame you were with."

I nodded. "Kid," I said, "I have a job for you. There's five hundred bucks in it."

He nodded back at me. "All right, I'll take it."

"I want you to go to Marion, Kansas. At once. There isn't any time to lose. You'll go to the Regent Hotel there. You'll see if a Hammersmith is registered. George Hammersmith. If he isn't, you'll wait. You'll ask him for a letter for me. As soon as you get it, you'll bring it back here."

"Okay, son. What was the name of that hotel?"

"The Regent." I took the five hundred bucks Judy had given to me and held it out. He looked at me oddly as he dropped it in his pocket.

"When I get back shall I meet you here or will I use the other address?"

"Either one. But it's essential you get going right away."

"Okay."

He got up slowly and reached for his hat. "I'm on my way."

I gave him time to get downstairs in the elevator; then I left, carefully pressing the catch so that the door locked itself behind me.

Judy Morehead sat in a booth of the Royal Bar, an untasted cocktail before her. Now that reaction had had time to set in, she was more nervous than before. Her face was pale, and she could not keep her fingers still.

"We're fools," she said. "They'll get us sooner or later. I should get a good lawyer and give myself up."

"If you're being framed," I told her, "whoever's framing you will be certain to make the frame stick. If you actually did kill Thorpe, you're cooked anyway. You can't win."

"If I can't win," she said hotly, "what about you? How can you ever square yourself?"

"I can't," I said slowly. "Ever." That sounded like a vague answer to her question. It wasn't. "We'll finish it out my way," I went on. "You'll need some clothes. Where do you live?"

"I've been spending most of my time at the estate. But I have a room at a downtown hotel here."

"Go there. Now. Get some clothes. Then go to this address." I scribbled it on a paper napkin and gave it to her. "And don't talk to anyone. And don't let anyone see you when you arrive at my place. And hurry."

I paid for her drink, had a double scotch myself, and watched her high heels click out of the bar. I drank steadily for the next thirty minutes, then went out, and proceeded on foot to the address I had given her.

I put the latch key in the door, turned it, and felt, somehow, that something was wrong. I stepped into the room and saw Arthur resting lazily in the best chair. Balanced carefully on his ample knee was an automatic.

He said, drawlingly, "Hello, Allan."

I drew a deep breath. I put my hand against the door jamb to steady myself. I had been afraid before in my life and recently, too. But now I was close to panic. Arthur had outwitted me. That was going to put me in a great deal of peril, and I wasn't the only guy involved.

I pulled myself together. "What are you doing here?"

He grinned amiably. "Trying to pick up an honest dollar. You know me well enough to know I'm always trying."

"I gave you an honest dollar to go to Marion."

"Uh-huh. I figured there might be more dough in staying here."

"Why?"

"Ever been to Marion?"

"No."

"I have. I lived in Wichita once. Only a few miles away. I know Marion quite well."

"So, what of it?"

"There isn't a Hotel Regent in Marion, Allan. So, I figured you were trying to get me out of the way."

He sighed and stood up, as if it cost him great physical effort. "So I came here and frisked the joint to see what you were up to. I didn't find anything."

I said bitterly, "I never should have let you know where I lived."

"That's right," he said. "But the way things are stacking up—since I found nothing in the apartment—I guess I'll have to frisk you."

HE ADVANCED on me, holding the muzzle of his gun at my stomach. The first item he found was Fortin's Police Special. He took it from me and dropped it into his pocket. At that moment the door buzzer sounded.

"Okay," he said. "Open it."

I did, reluctantly. Judy walked in, an overnight case in her hand. She saw Arthur's gun, dropped the valise, and said, "What now? Is he—"

"A pal of mine," I said bitterly. "An old pal."

"This, of course," said Arthur, "is Miss Morehead. Sit down, ma'am. My business won't take long. I was frisking you, Allan —remember? Your wallet please."

I gave it to him. Deftly he kept his gun on me as he went through its contents. He appeared uninterested until he unfolded a piece of legal foolscap. He whistled.

"You realize what this means?"

"I know what it means," I said shortly.

"With this," he said slowly, "we could clean up, Allan. There'd be enough for both of us. If it was handled right."

I said, "No."

He eyed me curiously. "You've got more scruples than you had once. This would literally set us for life."

I stretched out my hand. "You'd better give it back to me."

He put the foolscap back in my wallet and returned it. He sighed and looked somewhat undecided. Judy was watching him, an expression half of bewilderment, half of fear on her face.

"Well," I said, "and what do you intend to do?"

"Pursue the elusive dollar. Where that is, so am I. I guess I'll just look around a bit first."

"All right," I said. "Pursue it. Just let me say this. If you find that there is an elusive buck in something which will react against my personal interest, come and see me before you do anything. Maybe we can talk it over. Maybe I could add another

buck to the one you might be offered elsewhere."

"On that score," he said, "you can trust me." He walked toward the foyer. "Don't put your head outside too soon after I've left. I may still be in the hall. Well, so long, Al."

He waddled to the doorway and backed out, the gun still in his hand. Judy's cheeks were white. She turned her face to me. She said, "Who is he? What did he want? What in the name of heaven is going on?"

"We seem to be in some trouble," I said. I thought for a long moment. "Is there any way of getting back into the Worth house without using those front gates?"

"Sure. From the other side of the lake."

"You mean we'd have to swim?"

"Not necessarily, though I've done it dozens of times, with Bob. There's always a boat or canoe on the far shore. I don't suppose you'd scruple to steal a little thing like that!"

"No," I said, "I wouldn't."

She looked at me for a long time. Then she stood up and came toward me. She put her hand on my coat sleeve.

She said, "You're an odd guy. I just don't understand you. What makes you tick? What goes on in your head? Are you doing all this for me?"

"No."

"Then for what? Is there any woman you'd do anything for? Don't I attract you? Don't you feel the faintest desire to kiss me?"

"No," I said. "You least of all women."

She flushed. "Am I such a hag? What do you mean by that?"

"Some day you'll know," I said. "In the meantime, I must think."

She sat down and lit a cigarette. I paced the floor. After a long while she spoke hesitantly.

"That man," she said. "When he took that paper from your wallet. He said it was worth a fortune to both of you. If that was true, why didn't he keep it?"

"It's only worth something to me," I said. "It's only of value to him if I go along with it. It's not worth a nickel to anyone but me."

"Then I can't imagine what it is at all."

"You don't have to," I said. "Listen, I'm going up to the Worth house tonight. I'll need you with me, as a guide. Will you come?"

"After what you've already done, I could not very well refuse. What do you expect to find there?"

"Among other things, our fat friend Arthur in search of his elusive dollar. Maybe some other things."

"For instance?"

"I've decided that either Sadie killed Thorpe, you did, or he committed suicide. I don't quite figure Anthony's up to murder yet."

"You've certainly narrowed it down," she said ironically.

"All right. Once inside the house I shall be able to narrow it down even further. There must be some evidence there. There must be some angle to figure. Tell me, do you deny ever having messed around with Junior's photographic apparatus?"

"Of course, I deny it."

"Not ever, now."

"Never. I've never been in his dark room."

"Well, that's one checkable angle. And I think I have another. But tell me this. That kid, Anthony, is utterly spoiled. I suppose the old lady is mad about him?"

"Mad's the word. She was crazy about her own son, Anthony's father. When he died she transferred all her affection and even more to Anthony. She's truly insane where he's concerned. She's ruining the kid's life."

I nodded my head. I was glad to hear that.

"Look," she said, very earnestly, "I don't know why I seem to trust you. But do you honestly believe that you can find out who killed Thorpe? And find it out

before morning? Do you believe that?"

I nodded. "I believe I can find out for myself anyway. I believe that *I'll* know. Whether or not *I'll* be able to prove it to a guy like Fortin, I don't know. *I'll* have to have some luck. There's one thing more. I have some writing to do."

SHE sat in silence as I sat down at the desk and ran my fountain pen over a piece of writing paper. When I had finished, I got up and handed it to her.

"I want you to read this before I sign it."

She read it very slowly. She looked up from the paper and said, "Are you crazy?"

"No," I said.

"You know what you've written here?"

"Naturally. I have confessed that I killed Thorpe. I have concocted a cock-and-bull story of how I was black-mailing him and he squawked, threatened to call in the police. Of how I sneaked into the estate from the far side of the lake, hid outside the French windows to his office, and waited my opportunity. That I saw you bring his drink, and, shortly afterwards, when he apparently went out to the washroom, I entered the room and dropped a couple of globules of cyanide into the glass."

"But, of course, you did no such thing!"

"No," I said. "I didn't. Nevertheless, later I will go downstairs and have the janitor and his wife witness my signature to this paper. They don't have to read what's written there. They will only witness my signing. That makes it all very legal and permissible as evidence."

"I repeat," she said, "are you crazy?"

"No," I said. "I'm not crazy. And I'm not dead, either. And that's the crux of the entire thing. Let me try to explain at least a part of it to you."

She passed her hand over her forehead. She looked suddenly very tired. "Go on," she said. "I feel like a mouse in a maze."

"I want to try to get in the house unobserved. Of course we can't enter the

front way. The gatekeeper would call the coppers the instant he saw us. We're going to go in like thieves. We may well run into coppers, or my little pal, Arthur, or possibly the killer of Thorpe, who won't hesitate to kill again."

"You mean we may get killed?"

"I mean *I* may. I purpose to keep you well in the rear. Now, if I should die, it certainly doesn't mean a damned thing to me if all the world believes I killed Thorpe. Since I am not sure that you killed him, I'd like you to have an out."

"You mean I'm to use this confession only if anything happens to you?"

"That's right. If anything *should* happen to me, you'd be in one hell of a mess. Since I'm not sure you're guilty, that wouldn't be fair. You are entitled to the benefit of all reasonable doubt."

She shook her head. "I don't get it at all. There are times when you behave like a crummy crook. There are others when you seem almost noble."

"I'm a grateful guy," I said, "with a strong sense of loyalty. Now give me that paper and I'll go down to see the janitor."

I took it from her and went downstairs. When I returned, I put it in an envelope, sealed it, and handed it back to her.

"Put it in your bag," I said. "If I'm alive give it back to me afterwards."

She put the envelope in her bag, shaking her head as she did so. She asked, "When are we making this raid?"

"After dark. You're sure we can swipe a boat of some sort?"

"Certain."

It was a long afternoon. I thought of a pint of whisky in my suitcase and broke it out. The girl refused to drink. I emptied the bottle slowly, grimly, and without pleasure. She spoke to me but once.

"You know, it's odd that we should be here together. Do you know how I happened to come to your office?" She asked a second question before I could answer that one. "Do you know a man called Costain?"

"Quite well."

"Well, he's in the Marines with Bob. I wrote Bob, telling him someone ought to investigate Thorpe. He didn't know of anyone who did things like that, so he asked this Costain, who, apparently has been around quite a bit. Costain suggested you. He said you were tough and crooked but that you knew your job."

"Nice of him to add that," I said. I picked up the bottle again, and the conversation languished.

CHAPTER THREE

Sadie Doesn't Live—Any More

WE SET out at nine o'clock. Despite the alcohol which surged through my blood stream I was nervous. So was Judy. Externally, she was steady enough, but there was a tautness about her, a sharp nervousness in her eyes.

It was a crisp night in early spring. She assured me that it was too early in the season for the bungalows on the far side of the lake to be occupied. At her suggestion, we took a taxicab to the Green Mongoose, a roadhouse about a mile from our destination.

We had one drink at the bar, then set out on foot for the summer settlement. The wind came up as we walked around the edge of the lake. It whipped the surface into little waves and sighed moaningly through the trees.

Above us there was a new moon, obscured by an oyster-colored cloud. We plodded along the shore line for a good twenty minutes; then Judy took hold of my coat sleeve.

"Look," she said, pointing.

My gaze followed her outstretched arm. A mile or so away, with the lake between us and it, stood the Worth house. The wing which held Thorpe's office was brightly lighted.

"That part of the house is never open at

night," she said. "The police must be there."

"I hope," I said, "that they have Arthur."

"You really think your friend Arthur is there?"

"Knowing Arthur, it is utterly impossible for him to be anywhere else."

The wind had grown stronger now. We lowered our heads and pushed into it.

"There," said Judy abruptly, "there's your canoe."

There it was all right, up-ended and covered with tarpaulin. I took a knife from my pocket and cut it loose. Fortunately there were a pair of paddles beneath it. I dragged it down to the water's edge and launched it gingerly.

"I'm not very good at this," I said ruefully, "are you?"

She laughed. "I'm an expert. You sit in the bow and just paddle. I'll do the navigating."

I climbed clumsily into the bow. She said, "You can swim, can't you?"

I shook my head. "Not a stroke."

"Then," she said, with astonishing primness, considering the situation, "you shouldn't go canoeing."

I sat in the bow, paddle in hand, and waited for her. "Okay," she said.

I dipped my paddle into the water. I was aware of her deep sure stroke from the stern. We glided ahead through the choppy waters.

We were within a couple of hundred yards of the Worth house when it happened. A gust of wind and a wave hit us simultaneously. The canoe tipped perilously. Somehow, I seemed to lose my balance at the same time I lost my paddle. The canoe tipped over completely. Water, cold and final as a grave, closed over my head. I kicked my feet madly. My face came up above the water. I caught a glimpse of the canoe riding wrong side up. Judy held on to it with one hand. In her other she still gripped the paddle.

"Help me," I cried. "For God's sake—"

"Take it easy," she said. "Relax. Don't fight it."

She let the paddle float at her side and struck out toward me with powerful strokes. She spun me over on my back with astounding ease and said, "Just float. You'll be all right."

She hooked an arm under my chin and swam with one hand back to the canoe. There she retrieved the paddle and left me panting and hanging to the canoe with a freezing hand.

"We're all right," she said quite calmly. "The wind is with us. It'll blow us on shore in another ten minutes. Just hang on."

I hung on. She was quite right. Within ten minutes my feet touched bottom and I walked, dripping, ashore. She followed me. We stood, teeth chattering, for a moment and looked toward the house. Figures could be plainly seen through the French windows. At least one of them wore a policeman's uniform.

"Well, Sherlock," she said, "what now?"

I grinned at her. "I am now using my alternate plan. We shall go boldly up to the house, and I shall challenge the killer."

"You mean you know who the killer is?"

"Yes," I said.

"Then you've decided that it isn't me?"

"That's what I've decided. Come on."

We walked swiftly up to the windows. I rapped sharply on the glass. Glancing through the pane I saw a frozen moment of consternation within. Then the big window was opened. Standing, facing us, was Lieutenant Fortin. The expression on his face was, I am certain, the closest thing to amazement that he could register.

However, he kept his voice flat and bland as he said, "Good evening. Please come in."

WE STEPPED into the room, dripping water to the lush floor. Besides Fortin there were two uniformed men, one

a police sergeant. Seated in an easy chair, lounging comfortably, was Arthur. There was a cut on the right side of his face and a little blood on his lip. On the other side of the room was Aunt Sadie wearing a fresh application of rouge. Little Lord Fauntleroy, I took it, had been put to bed.

Arthur winked at me. "Don't worry, Allan," he said, "I've told them nothing."

"Naturally," I said. "You hadn't had a chance to ask me my price for telling them nothing."

"Maybe I get a couple of coats?" said Judy to Fortin. "We're freezing to death."

Fortin nodded. He spoke to the patrolman. "Welks, go with the lady to get some coats. Don't lose sight of her and bring her back right away."

He gave me a cigarette while we waited. I fumbled it alight with frozen fingers.

Judy and Welks returned. She wore a heavy fur jacket over her wet gown. She handed me a camel's hair coat which was the most expensive I had ever worn. I donned it.

"Well," said Fortin, "I don't understand this sudden and damp appearance but who am I to conduct a dental examination on a gift horse. You've saved me a hell of a lot of trouble showing up. Okay, boys, I guess we can take everyone along now."

"On what charges?" said Arthur, settling more comfortably in his chair.

"The girl for murder," said Fortin. "This guy"—he indicated me—"for impersonation, compounding a felony, and accessory after the fact of murder. You"—speaking again to Arthur—for illegal entry, disorderly conduct, and insolence to an officer."

"Impersonation?" said Judy. "Who's he impersonating?"

"Dasher."

"Dasher?"

Arthur stirred in his chair. "He's deceived you, baby. I'm Dasher."

"But why—why?"

I fought back the chill that was on me and stepped forward. "Lieutenant," I said, "you're essentially interested in the killer, aren't you?"

"Sure. But we've got her."

"You haven't yet. Will you listen to me for a moment?"

"Why not? I owe you that. If you hadn't showed, I would have had to go out and find you. Speak your piece. I could stand a little enlightenment on your part, anyway. Who the devil are you?"

"You see, Allan?" said Arthur Dasher. "I didn't tell 'em anything."

"Good," I said, "I'll give you your dollar."

For the first time Aunt Sadie lifted her voice. "Fortin," she said, "will you get these people out of here? I wish to retire."

"In just a minute," I said. "Look, Fortin, this girl didn't kill Thorpe. She was framed. You found her prints on the glass, didn't you?"

"Of course. We checked them with prints on the brushes in her room here."

"Okay. But I'll bet you never found any on the cyanide bottle."

Fortin shrugged. "I don't know yet. The bottle's down at the departmental laboratory now."

"You won't find her prints on it," I said. "So she wiped them off."

"Why should she wipe them off the bottle and not off the glass? There's another item. Aunt Sadie, here, found the body. She's a respectable old woman who would not be supposed to know much about poisons, murder, or any kindred subject. Yet when she found Thorpe unconscious, she didn't call a doctor. She called you. She knew he was dead."

"Well," said Fortin. "He was, wasn't he?"

"He was," I said. "But she told you he'd been killed by cyanide, too."

"That's easy. Cyanide has a very definite odor. Any mug who's read a detective novel knows that."

"Sure it has. It has a smell of peaches. And what was Thorpe drinking? Peach brandy. It'd take an expert to detect a cyanide smell in that glass."

"I detected it," said Fortin. "It has a faint almond smell as well."

"You're an expert," I said.

There was a long silence. Arthur Dasher looked up at me admiringly. "Very good, Allan," he said. "It won't convince the D. A. but it's not a bad try anyway."

"Dasher's right," said Fortin. "We'd all better go downtown."

Fortin was reaching for his coat. I said hurriedly, "Of course, I was just giving you the circumstantial background. If you'll wait a minute, I'll hand you a confession."

"Confession?" said Fortin. "From whom?"

"Aunt Sadie," I said.

AUNT SADIE glanced at me with glittering eyes. "The man is impertinent, Fortin. In every sense of the word. Will you please remove him?"

Fortin smiled bleakly. "Do you think you'll get a confession from her?"

"I think so," I said. "Listen to this first: She's crazy about that brat, Anthony. And I mean crazy literally. She's spoiled him so that he almost smells. She'd do anything for him. Anything. Especially if it involved his picking up a fortune. You get the setup? She distrusts Thorpe, as did other people. She thinks he's mulcting an estate which will eventually be Anthony's. She wants to get rid of him."

"She also wants to get rid of Judy Morehead. Or any girl that Bob Worth might want to marry. That, too, would cut into Lord Fauntleroy's inheritance. She agreed with Judy that Thorpe's actions would bear looking into. But she kept an eye open herself for an opportunity to do Anthony some good."

"You mean," put in Arthur Dasher, "that when it so happened that Thorpe asked Judy to get him his drink, the old

lady waited until Judy had gone, waited until Thorpe perhaps absented himself from his desk for a moment, then dumped in the cyanide, figuring she could kill two birds with one stone?"

Fortin sighed. "It isn't good enough," he said. "It's all conjecture. Didn't you say something about a confession?"

"Yes," I said. I stuck my hand into my pocket. I pulled out my wallet and removed its water-proof covering. I took a paper from it—an official looking paper of legal foolscap.

"Aunt Sadie," I said, "here's my proposition. If, Sadie, you persist in denying that you killed Thorpe, Anthony will never get a cent from the Worth estate. I'll sell it down the river within the next forty-eight hours. I'll buy the most worthless oil stock I can find with the proceeds. There won't be a nickel left at the end of the week."

Sadie blinked at me. Fortin lifted his brows, and his eyes asked if I had gone mad. Dasher uttered a low whistle, then chuckled.

"On the other hand," I resumed, "if you'll confess right now, I'll set up a trust fund for the boy. A fund to see that he receives a decent education and large enough to give him a moderate income for the rest of his life. It's up to you. Does Anthony not get a dime, or does he get a trust fund?"

"Fortin," said Aunt Sadie, "hadn't you better call for a strait jacket?"

Fortin said quietly, "Just how are you going about disposing of the Worth estate? It isn't yours, is it?"

"No," I said. "But I can wreck it if I want to." I handed him the paper. "Read that. It's a complete power-of-attorney, superseding all other powers-of-attorney. It's signed by Robert Worth and witnessed by his commanding general. You can put me in jail, and you can put me in a strait jacket. I'll simply get a lawyer. I can do it and do it legally. I can leave the Worth

estate penniless. And, by God, I'll do it."

Sadie lifted her rheumy eyes and glanced at Fortin. He sighed and handed me back the paper. He answered Sadie's unasked question.

"Yes," he said, "it's on the level. He can do it, all right."

Sadie's rheumy eyes grew moist.

"I loved him so much," she murmured. "He's exactly like his father." She pulled herself together. "How much of a fund will you establish for him?"

"I'll guarantee a hundred thousand dollars. Later, Bob may increase it."

"You'll promise? You'll *make* him do it, Fortin?"

Fortin looked at me, then at Sadie. He nodded his head. "I'm sure he'll do it."

"Very well. I poisoned him. I'll do whatever you say, Fortin. But the boy must be taken care of. He mustn't be told of this."

"I'll promise you that," said Judy and there was a tremor in her voice. Then she turned. "You're Costain," she said. "Allan Costain."

"Lieutenant Costain," I said. "Retired."

HALF an hour later we were alone in the huge living room. A log fire blazed upon the vast open hearth.

"Bob Worth," I told her, "was a worried man. He'd received letters from you hinting all wasn't well, letters from Sadie saying the same thing, and letters from Thorpe saying that you were a tramp and Sadie a potential thief. He didn't know whom to trust."

"So you recommended Dasher to help him?"

"I told him of Dasher, and he wrote to you about it. Then I suddenly received my medical discharge. Bob gave me this complete power-of-attorney. Told me to do anything I liked. Most of all to find out if you were on the level. You see, he loved you."

(Continued on page 113)

THRILL DOCKET

DIME DETECTIVE
MAGAZINE



Private-eye Bill Spence looked up from his desk five o'clock that afternoon to find himself staring down the nozzle of killer Cannon's .45. Cannon wanted to find a crime lord, Max Fesser. Spence was said to be buying out of the Bart Lacy kill.

Spence had twenty-four hours to find Fesser or get a slug in his gut. Only he'd never seen Max in his life. Whitey Kincaid, an alcoholic bookies, might find Max, if anyone could. But Whitey was so scared Spence could hardly get in the door.



Whitey reluctantly arranged for Spence to see Fesser. Fesser was big, suave and well-heeled. He regretted his enemies had annoyed Spence and regretted Spence was annoying **HIM**. Perhaps, for a sum, Spence could get rid of Cannon himself.

Spence agreed and took a packet—a gift—from Fesser—five hundred bucks for free lunches, for friendship, and headed to the killer. And for what occurred then, read "Talent for Violence," in the August issue, on sale June 3rd.



The flashlight showed him a cold, staring, waxy face. . . .

LAST WARNING!

By **GROVER
BRINKMAN**

*"I told you never to come back,"
the man told Matt. So, within two
hours, Matt had a battered corpse
on his hands, the cops on his trail,
and murder at his throat!*

THE Dixie Limited roared into River Rock, its brakes screeching a fiery pattern in the inky night. Matt Dailey got off the train as if a bit confused by the sudden rain and fog, wondering whether Joe Bates would be there to meet him.

The long concrete platform was deserted, stretched gloomily ahead to a pinpoint of incandescence that was the agent's light in

the cubby-hole depot. Matt turned up the collar of his coat as protection against the rain and started for the shelter of the building.

A figure came out of the blackness, a heavy rain-coated man, wide of shoulders, and long of arm. He stood silhouetted in the dim light from the window, a formidable road-block.

Matt halted, trying vainly to remember the shadowy outline of a square-jawed face that lurked deep in his memory.

"You're Dailey," the raincoated man said, matter-of-fact.

"Yes," Matt began. "And you're—Bill Stretch!"

"Yeah. Remember, I told you once never to come back."

"That was four years ago—"

"It's still good."

Matt got a smoke going. "There isn't a law—"

"That'll keep a man out of a town? No, I guess there isn't. But I'm the law in River Rock, Dailey. And the ultimatum still stands."

Matt took a slow drag on the cigarette, tried to remain calm.

"Look, Stretch," he said, tempering his voice, "I'll keep out of your way, out of River Rock, even. But not tonight. Myrtle wired me to come down at once. I don't know what's up, but the fact that she called is enough. I told her I'd be here tonight on the Dixie, and she wired back that Joe Bates would meet me in a car. Maybe something's wrong with Corey—whatever it is, I'm here."

"There's nothing wrong with Corey, Matt. Dunn and I saw him not less than four hours ago. He was with Joe Bates at the time, taking a liquor inventory. If Myrtle called you down here, she had her own little axe to grind—and it wouldn't be anything good."

A squat, humped little man came out of the depot; squinting in the dim light. It was Hank Daniels, the night agent.

"Oh, hello, Stretch!" he said. Then he turned to Matt. "You're Matt Dailey, aren't you? Sure—you look older. I got a mesage for you—phone call just a few moments ago, from Joe Bates. Said he was tied up in a business deal on the other side of town. You're to drive his coupe out to the ranch. He'll come out later in a taxi."

Daniels looked around, squinting into the fog. "That must be his coupe alongside the platform, over there. Said the keys were in the glove compartment."

Matt flipped away the cigarette, turned to Stretch. "What's the verdict?"

The raincoated man seemed to be considering. He half turned, so that the dim light fell across his face. Matt, watching the dark eyes set under bushy brows, suddenly imagined he noticed a crafty look steal over the heavy-jowled face. His attitude was unnatural, as if he were putting on a well rehearsed act.

"Okay, Dailey," Stretch said. "But stay out at the ranch. The first time you show your ugly nugg in town—"

Matt turned away, heading for the car. His long-planed face wore a scowl. He had a vague feeling of premonition. Something was wrong, but he couldn't put his finger on what it was.

Bill Stretch walked over to a parked station-wagon, a dim outline in the fog. Matt saw a tall, emaciated-looking figure leaning against the door. That would be Mike Dunn, his deputy.

AS HE climbed into Joe Bates' car, his mind was in a turmoil. How did Stretch and Dunn know he was coming down on the Dixie? They'd been there, waiting for the train to get in. Was it by chance, had someone tipped them off? Who—Corey? And, why?

Corey hated him—every inch. So did Stretch. Matt realized now that he never should have come back. But Myrtle's voice over the phone left him no alternative.

It would be good to see her again, and his old sidekick, Joe Bates, as well.

He took his time, heading west on 460. The car was new and strange to him, and the night was a mysterious gray curtain. He turned on the fog lights and concentrated on the road.

The feeling of apprehension grew, with each swish of the wiper. Corey, Stretch, Dunn—a vicious combine, out for his scalp. Bitter memory flooded in on him. Corey and Bates had been his partners when they opened the Ranch, right after the war. Charcoal steaks, drinks mixed with the skill he had learned from an old-timer on the Sunset Strip, a few nickel slot machines, a dance floor. Out in the county, miles from a town. The young crowd liked that, and business had been good.

And there was Myrtle with her creamy skin and hair black as a raven's wing. Like a Greek goddess she was, and with brains, too! The type of gal that put a longing deep inside you, each time she walked by.

The pattern of the windshield wiper, swishing across the rain-stained glass, suddenly intrigued him. His life had been a pattern like that. Work, and sleep, and work again. Only one dissipation. And Corey knew that weakness, even encouraged it. Too many drinks. Smooth sailing with Myrtle at first—even an edge on Corey and Bates. But things had gradually changed. First Myrtle showed a strange aloofness, a coldness. His despondency only fired his drinking.

Finally the inevitable rift. When he sobered up, he found that Corey and Myrtle had been married and that he was no longer part-owner of the Ranch. There it was, his name on the bill of sale—for a paltry thousand bucks. He'd beaten Corey to a pulp, would have killed him, if Stretch and Dunn hadn't happened by. Somehow he had never blamed Bates, who at the time happened to be away on a hunting trip.

Stretch had put him on a North-bound train and told him never to come back—or else.

Instinctively Matt put his hand to his face. He felt old, far beyond his twenty-seven years. Why had he grabbed the first train down when she phoned? Why couldn't he erase all memory of her, turn back, and forget it all?

The motor coughed, sputtered spasmodically, died. He ground the starter, pumped the accelerator. A few asthmatic coughs, but no rhythmic sound. He coasted to the side of the road. Out of gas, probably.

He found a flashlight in the glove compartment, got out, and started around to the back. The rain stabbed at him and the silence and loneliness, with the soft moan of wind violining high in the bottomland oaks. Somewhere nearby a dog barked, plaintive as coyote.

He got the gas tank cap off, found a limber stick, and ran it down into the goose-neck of the tank. Bone dry. Possibly there'd be an auxiliary tank of gas in the trunk compartment. Anyway, it was worth a look.

The trunk lid came up—and he stood there, staring, while his stomach turned over, and an icy hand crept up and pulled the marrow out of his spine.

The flashlight showed him a cold, staring, waxy face, with wide-open dead eyes that would never see again.

"Corey!" he said. His voice sounded like a rasp, running over knotty wood.

Suddenly he found himself trembling, sick and afraid. He was on his belly at the Normandy beach again, with two minutes to go, shaking, sick, retching inside. His heart was hammering itself to death inside his chest.

His first instinct was to flee, to put miles between himself and that gory, grisly thing in the trunk. But he checked the impulse by sheer willpower. He had to think—calmly, sanely. He was a candidate for the

hot seat, and it looked as if the votes were all in.

Corey Boyle wasn't exactly pleasant to look at. Someone had caved in the entire top of his skull with a heavy weapon, by a quick, sledgehammer blow from the rear. Rigor mortis hadn't even set in. That meant that he had been killed only a short time before he had stepped down from the Dixie's day coach.

Who? Myrtle Boyle? Anger flamed up in him, slowly, deadly, to replace the fear. It could have been Myrtle. The fact that she had called him, asking him to come down on the Dixie pointed to her at least as an accessory. Someone had helped her, of course. But there had to be a motive. What could be her motive?

Stretch, or his deputy, Dunn? That was a bit far-fetched, too, for Stretch was a constable for one thing. Bates? No, there would be no motive here, either. Matt racked his brain, trying to remember the different people he had known in this area, during the three years he had been a co-partner at the Ranch. But none of them were of any importance.

Possibly Myrtle's call had been a subterfuge. If she was mixed up in this thing, perhaps that had been merely a foil to get him out here.

Somewhere down the road the dog barked again. It gave him an idea. He shut the trunk lid on its gory cargo, pushed the car farther off the slab. There was an incline here, and the car coasted down the hill, at least partly out of sight. He started in the direction of the ranch.

The roar of a motor came out of the night, and instinctively he sprinted for the woods, hugged the wet ground. But the car passed, a heavy truck, without decelerating. He watched its multiple tail lights disappear into the gray curtain.

A FEW minutes later he glimpsed the neon, dimly through the fog-murk. "Gas Up," the red banner said. And un-

derneath it, in smaller green, the one word, "Eat." The place looked deserted, but the lights were on, and he pushed open the door and went inside.

A fat man with three chins was draped over a high stool, back of the counter, dozing.

"Coffee," Matt said. "Strong and black."

The fat man slid off the stool. "I didn't hear you drive up," he said.

"I didn't. Ever hear of a hoover?"

"On a night like this?" The fat man made a face. "You've been the third fellow in here since dark. Business smells. But I gotta keep open."

"Why do you have to keep open?"

The fat man made a face again. "I dunno. Routine, I guess."

"How's the hamburger?"

"I eat it, friend."

"Fry one—heavy on the onions."

"I'll make it two. I'm almost always hungry."

He started for the refrigerator. The outside door slammed open, and a masked man stood in the opening. He carried a wicked looking little belly gun, and it covered the room quite effectively.

"This is a stick-up!" he said. The voice was unreal, muffled.

The fat man didn't seem to be impressed. "You're in the wrong place, pal," he said. "There isn't even a fin in the register—"

"Shut up!" the masked man said. He started edging around. And suddenly Matt noticed something. The belly gun seemed to be covering him, more than the fat man. The stick-up man was a southpaw, too. The muzzle of the belly gun, steady as a rock in the guy's left hand, looked big as a cannon.

This wasn't a hold-up. This was going to be plain, deliberate, cold-blooded murder for one Matt Dailey.

He hit the floor backwards from the high stool and rolled like a log. The belly gun crashed twice, in quick succession.

The first shot showered splinters from the wood floor into his face; the second put a crimson crease alongside his jaw.

Suddenly the lights went out. He breathed a word of prayer for the fat man, crawled along the base of the counter in the blackness, trying to get out of range. The belly gun crashed again, and glass tinkled somewhere.

He heard the roar of a car outside, the squeal of brakes. A car door slammed—hard. Footsteps sounded, running for the front door. Other footsteps slithered across the room, to the rear. Somewhere from the back of the room a door banged as the would-be killer made his exit.

Then the fluorescents winked on, and Bill Stretch was framed in the front doorway, with his deputy, Dunn, just behind him. He had a police positive in his fist, and there was a question on his surly, square-jawed face.

"We heard shots," he said, looking at the fat man. "What's it all about, Tubby—stick-up?"

Then he saw Matt, rising from the floor, brushing his clothes. There was blood on his face, from the bullet crease on his jaw.

"Man came in with a mask on his face," the fat man said. "Looked like a stick-up. But for no reason at all, he started pumping lead at this customer." He pointed to Matt.

"You hurt?" Stretch asked.

"No. Ruined a few whiskers, maybe."

Stretch came forward a step. Strangely, the gun still remained in his hand. "What's it all about?" he asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"What happened to your car?"

Matt was watching Stretch's eyes, but they revealed nothing. Possibly he knew about the body, possibly he did not.

"I ran out of gas back up the road," he said, trying to keep his voice steady.

His coffee cup still reposed on the counter. He moved over to it, picked it up.

He needed the coffee more than Stretch realized.

Stretch stood there, looking at him. He made no motion to put up his gun.

"You didn't push the car far enough," he said finally. "Our fog lights, coming around the bend, picked it out, plain as day. Too bad you had to kill Corey and stuff his body in the trunk!"

This was it. They weren't interested in the guy who had attempted to kill him. Possibly it was even part of the act.

Another moment and Stretch would have a handcuff around his wrist, and it would be a straight ride to the electric chair—with no detours. Not a jury in the state would acquit him.

His split-second action was the result of terror—plain madness. The cup of coffee was half way to his lips when he flung it, cup and all, at Stretch's bulldog face. The cup sailed past his head, crashed through the glass panel of the door, but the coffee spewed over him like steaming rain.

It gave Matt the half-second he needed. He flung his full weight at the cop's torso, heard him grunt in pain as he slammed backward, piling against the tall form of Dunn, the deputy. Matt didn't wait to see what happened after that. He scrambled to his feet, gasping for breath, and bolted for the side door.

THE fog-filled night enveloped him, even as Stretch's heavy gun shattered the stillness with quick-triggered shots. A slug ricocheted off a metallic surface near his head, and he heard the sing of lead as he ran. A moment later he slammed broadside into the trunk of a tree and lay panting on the ground, little more than conscious.

Wheezing for breath, he began crawling away. Angry, excited voices were shouting, back at the gas station. Presently the beam of a spotlight cut a swath through the fog. But he was out of range now. He lay panting on a wet carpet of leaves,

wondering how long it would be before they started combing the woods for him, or turned loose a couple of dogs.

The pattern was more complex now than ever. Not only were Stretch and Dunn after his scalp, but some unknown killer was gunning for him as well. Why? That was the big question that kept repeating itself. What was back of it all? Why, out of a clear sky, had he been framed for a murder he did not commit? Why was he a guinea pig for killers who could not stop until he was cold turkey?

Matt started worming his way through the woods, working away from the blur of light that was the gas station. Then he halted, stood still in the fog, considering. He was doing just what they expected him to do—running. Possibly, if he worked back toward the station, he might learn something. The fog was a thick curtain that would screen him until he got to the edge of the clearing.

The station dog, possibly, would be a problem. He was sure that the dog had been to the left of the building, possibly tied to a tree. He worked to the right of the station, halted just outside the range of light.

"He can't cross the creek," Stretch was saying, "for the water's up. He'll naturally keep to the timber until daybreak. Possibly try to hitch a ride."

"That writer fellow's got a cabin, down on Rockaway Reach. He might get a car there." That was Mike Dunn speaking.

"He'd have to come out on 460. No bridge across the creek until you get past Corey's place."

"Want me to get the dogs?"

"Yeah. Take Tubby's car. I'll patrol the road. Better bring the coroner along, too."

"What about the highway patrol?"

Stretch cursed. "We won't need 'em—this is strictly personal."

"Yeah, that's the way I feel," Dunn acquiesced.

A motor roared, and Matt, crouched behind a pile of old fence rails, saw a ribbon of light cut the fog and head down 460, back toward town.

That was all he needed to know. He wormed back into the woods, worked away from the station, toward the highway. As soon as he made the cement, he started running. One thing was in his favor—the fog. It had stopped raining now, but the fog was heavier than ever. Stretch would patrol the highway, possibly—but how could Stretch find him in this fog? The moment he heard a car coming, all he had to do was leap off the right-of-way, out of light range, and hug the ground until the car passed. Nothing could penetrate that gray curtain that clung to the hills tonight. Nothing could, that is, until Dunn returned with the dogs. That would take an hour or more. In an hour he'd be at the ranch.

He was almost on top of the place before he spotted the winking neon of the ranch. Twice he had leaped for the shelter of the protecting woods, as traffic passed. One of the cars might have been Stretch. He wasn't sure. They were just blurs, with firefly headlights.

For a long time he hugged the shrubbery near the ranch's driveway. There were only a dozen or more cars in the parking lot. Faintly came the sound of dance music. Raucous laughter filtered out of the night once, as a departing group sought their car.

Was Stretch at the ranch, waiting for him? It could be. But he doubted it. Possibly Stretch had phoned ahead, to be on the lookout for him. At the time he was escorted out of town, they had employed a bouncer by the name of Jeff Leeds who carried a special deputy badge. Leeds, if still on the payroll, would be playing hand in hand with Stretch, for political reasons if nothing else. If Stretch was playing it smart, he would still be patrolling the road, letting Leeds watch

the ranch for him while he was away.

Matt started for the rear of the ranch building. He wormed through the shrubbery and glued his eye to the corner of a window. He was looking into what formerly had been part of the dance floor; now the building had been partitioned off. One wall of the room he was looking into contained a long bank of slot machines. He glimpsed other gambling equipment, as well. Evidently the lid was really off on gambling in the county. This looked like a wideopen spread, not the hidden, nickel slots they had had when he was co-owner.

Something came out of the night, a gray solid in the fog curtain. Instinctively he ducked, threw his body violently to one side. The act probably saved his life. A sledge-hammer blow slid off his shoulder with sickening force, and a heavy object thudded into the soft earth. Even as he rolled away, he thought of Corey's bashed-in skull, a swift, bone-shattering blow from the rear. Was he up against the same mad killer?

He crouched, waiting, eyes trying vainly to pinpoint the fog. He heard, rather than saw, the towering figure in front of him. He ducked low, and waded in. He connected with soft, yielding flesh. Something cut the air with a soft swish. He felt a tug at his shoulder. A club-swinging killer, a giant of a man, probably with a section of gas pipe. He thought of the big bouncer, Leeds.

The club came at him again. He felt its grazing impact, across his chest. This was no good—decidedly no good. One contact, and he would be hamburger.

CROUCHING, his hand encountered a good-sized rock. He tossed it in the shrubbery, several feet to his right. Then he waded in low. He was right in his deductions. The would-be killer had turned at the sound of the rock in the shrubbery.

Matt swung every ounce of strength in a blow that rocked off his opponent's head,

mashing his knuckles. He heard a grunt of pain, and something crashed against the stone siding of the building. That would be the club.

He waded in again, and crushing arms suddenly squeezed him, bent him backward, while clawing fingers reached for his eyes. Desperate, he brought up his knees. He heard a quick intake of breath, and the hands on his face relaxed their hold.

He swung again. A hammer-like fist stopped him in mid-air, sent him sprawling. This was pre-historic, cave man fighting. Kill or be killed. Crush, dig, maim—no holds barred. His chest ached from the single blow. An inch or two lower, and his ribs would have cracked like so many match sticks.

He waded in low, and again long, ape-like arms stopped him. Red-hot fire stung his shoulder. He crouched on the ground, real terror beginning to creep into his jaded mind now. What was he fighting—some gargantuan monster that played with him like a puppet?

His groveling hands found the club. It was a section of pipe, just as he thought. His fingers closed greedily around the cold metal. This was kill or be killed. He felt no compunction as he wobbled to his feet, and swung the club.

Its impact was sickening—steel crushing flesh and bone. A heavy body slumped to the ground, with a wheeze of escaping breath. Panting, sick, he stood there, the gospipe still clutched in his hands.

The lights of a car cut an arc in the fog pattern, as someone backed out of the parking lot. For an instant he saw the man's face—Leeds, the big bouncer.

Corey and Myrtle's trim cottage, to the west of the ranch building, was dark and apparently deserted. He had shared this cottage with Corey at one time—before Myrtle had moved in. He still had a key that might fit, unless the locks had been changed. He had a hunch, nothing more, that he might unravel some of the mystery

by examining Corey's personal effects.

The key worked, and he slid inside, a shadow among shadows. He stood just inside the hallway, listening. The cottage was dark and still. Somewhere he heard a clock ticking faintly.

He moved silently through the hall, toward the den. He passed a bedroom door, thought better of it, and moved back and opened the door. Dark and still inside, just like the rest of the house. There was a faint odor of perfume here—Myrtle's, that same, heady scent she always wore. He was about to move on when he heard a slight noise, the creak of a bed spring. He went inside, hugging the shadows. A bit of outside light drifted over the bed, then he saw the squirming figure. Tied, hand and foot, he found out presently—and gagged as well. He worked quickly in the dark.

"It's Matt," he whispered.

Then she was in his arms, crying, choking from the gag, half-hysterical. Suddenly he pushed her away, still suspicious.

"Why'd you call me?" he asked.

"Corey made me," she sobbed. "When you were run out of town, your signature was a forgery."

"You mean my name on the bill of sale?"

"Yes."

"How'd you find out—and what has it got to do with my being here?"

"A seismograph crew has been working the county, for the past several months. Corey got pretty friendly with one of the oil men. He and Bates leased the land they own, with a clause in the lease that called for actual drilling in 60 days. The oil company was pretty cautious about titles. One of their checkers found the signature was a forgery."

"It still doesn't add up. Why was Corey killed?"

Matt heard her sudden sharp intake of breath. "Corey—dead?" she said dazedly.

"You mean you didn't know? Look, I'm

the patsy. You called me to come down. Joe Bates would meet me. He wasn't at the depot, but his car was. I started out to the ranch and ran out of gas. Someone had drained the tank—purposely. Corey's body was in the trunk, when I raised the lid to look for an extra gas can."

She was silent, crying softly. He told her the rest of the story.

"Why were Stretch and Dunn tipped off? Did you do it?"

She clutched at him, and in the dim light he saw her eyes wide with fright, her bosom heaving. "I had to, Matt—"

"Who tied and gagged you—and why?"

"Corey. At the last moment he got suspicious. They simply wanted to get you down here, compel you to sign a real bill of sale yourself—"

"What if I wouldn't sign?"

"Corey said they could work you over systematically—and you'd be glad to."

"And then Stretch and Dunn were to escort me out of town, eh?"

The jigsaw puzzle was falling in place now, in this enigma built around his name on a scrap of paper.

"One thing still doesn't make sense," he continued. "The guy who tried to kill me in Tubby's grill was a southpaw. Joe Bates is a southpaw, Myrtle. It still doesn't gibe, for even if it was Joe, why would he want to kill me, if he wanted my signature on a bill of sale? I couldn't sign it after he put a couple of slugs in me, and that's what the masked man tried to do—"

THE room lights winked on in sudden brilliance, blinding them. Matt whirled, to see a tall, slim man standing in the doorway, a belly gun cradled in his left fist.

"You're wrong, Matt," Joe Bates said softly. "I tried to kill you all right, at Tubby's. But you're wrong about the signature on the bill of sale. This oil talk is nothing but hot air—"

"I'm way ahead of you," Matt said in

grim humor. "Cheating cheaters. It's a pretty old one, but I guess it still works. You just played dumb and let Corey and Stretch work out their little plant to get my signature on a genuine bill of sale, for the oil drilling rights. But you figured out a far simpler plan for your own benefit. You'd kill Corey and frame me for it. Even if you didn't kill me yourself, I'd hang for Corey's murder—"

"You're forgetting one thing, Matt. Myrtle."

"You wouldn't—"

"Yes, I would—both of you. You can take the blame for one more, Matt. No—two. I forgot Leeds."

"What a fool I've been," Matt said bitterly. "You! A fine, decent friend!"

"She wanted you first, Matt. But you liked the bottle too much. I wasn't in on the first shuffle. But she tied up with Corey, when she should have tied up with me. Corey started pushing me around, cheating. Then this oil talk really made him crazy with greed. He was going to cut me out. I saw it coming. So I beat him to the game. A better plan than he had—"

"You killed Corey, Joe—"

"No, Leeds did. Leeds will kill for pay. I heard Corey talking to him, offering him two hundred dollars to put me out of the way. I raised the ante to five, and he split Corey's skull with the same gaspive he tried on you."

An outside door slammed, footsteps raced across the hall.

"Freeze!" Joe Blates said, and moved back from the door.

Bill Stretch loomed in the doorway, gun in hand. Matt crouched and lunged for Bates' legs, using every ounce of strength he had. But the moment he moved, he knew he wasn't going to make it. Bates' bullet would be faster.

It got him in midair. He felt the hot slug bore through his shoulder, whirling him around like a kid's top. Then he

was at Bates' knees. Indistinctly he saw Stretch's gun arm come up, and Bates swung lightning-like, to trigger the belly gun.

Stretch stood there awkwardly, as if reluctant to fall, half supported by the door jam, a small crimson hole in his wide forehead.

Bates, his face working convulsively, kicked loose from Matt's grip, backed away. Matt felt his senses swimming.

Bates laughed now, like a maniac, and the belly gun whirled, steadied. This was it! Matt reached out blindly, tried to roll out of the bullet's path. His eyes seemed hypnotized on Bates' tightening trigger finger.

Like a drowning man, his fingers hooked convulsively in the rug. It was a small throw-rug, and Bates was standing on it. He yanked with all his feeble strength. He was too weak to accomplish his purpose—and there wasn't time, either.

His yank, however, did jolt Bates enough that the slug crashing out of his gun plucked at his coat sleeve instead of boring into his chest. He yanked again, and hit Bates with all the strength in his one good arm, as he slid to the floor.

The red fog was coming in again—tons and tons of it. But he kept driving with his one good fist, again and again into Bates' face, until it felt as if he was pounding a big bowl of jelly.

In a daze he heard window glass shatter. Then into the room crawled the fat man, Tubby, a shotgun in his ham-like fist. He stood there, gazing at the unconscious form of Bates, the sprawled body of Stretch, and Matt crouched over his victim, sick and weak.

"You can tie him up, and phone the highway patrol," Matt said weakly, smiling at Myrtle's clumsy fingers trying to stop the flow of blood from his shoulder.

"Hell!" the fat man said, "I used to be a sheriff down in Pecos county, and this is just like old times!"

• • •



The flash beam pinned us like flies.
"Hold it, chumps! This is a gun.
Come out slow!"

DOPE IN THE DARK

By ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN

At last she and I were alone together, parked with the lights out in Lover's Lane. But there was no romance in the gun I clutched in my hand. . . .

LONGERGON came into the Detective's Room like he was shot from a gun.

"Hey!" he panted. "You see the dish?" I looked up from the paper I was reading. "What dish?"

"In Cap's office right now. Oh my, oh

my, what a babe! A dish like you never seen, Johnnie. What you suppose she wants, huh?"

I shook my head and found my paragraph. "Not you," I told him. "Take five, will you? I've got one this morning."

Longnergon dropped into a chair. "You

sure look like hell. Some night, huh?"

I felt worse. I threw the paper on the floor and leaned back, eyes closed. Lonnergon clucked his tongue a few times, and sighed from way down here.

"What a dish!" he crooned. "Dolls, all kinds, I've seen, but nobody like this. About half a minute big, and . . ."

I stopped listening because I was back to thinking about a dish of my own I'd met last night at the usual Sunday evening soirée Sam and Bess Campion threw whenever they were in town. In case you recognize the name, let me add quickly that Sam and Bess are several cuts above me socially, but Sam and I did the Korean tour together, and when Uncle let us get out, Sam wouldn't stand for just a farewell handshake and good wishes. As a result, whenever Sam and Bess needed an extra man, or didn't need one, I was their boy.

Anyway, I'd gone last night and was doing a very nice job of relaxing when Bess came walking over with a dream straight out of heaven, and I immediately took off on cloud six. I couldn't remember what her name was, but that didn't matter. I could remember her, and how we spent the entire evening all tête-à-tête. When Bess told her I was a real live detective, her eyes went this big, and I knew the stage was all set.

It's kind of funny when people meet a detective. Their faces light up, and their eyes go ga-ga. Like they were meeting Superman and not just another hard-working slob like themselves. Anyway, this chick's face lighted up like that, so I just whipped the horses and let them go. She asked the questions, and I gave her the answers. Brother, but I gave her the answers. Before I took my leave, about five minutes before I'd ordinarily fall on my face, I had her believing that even J. Edgar Hoover seldom made a move without talking it over with me.

She was truly a beautiful, lovely, gorgeous dream straight out of Hollywood, but

when I woke up Monday morning I wanted to cut my throat. Not all because of my head, either. Because I'd forgotten her name, forgotten to get her phone number and address, and forgotten also that Sam and Bess were taking off for someplace right after the party, so I'd have to wait until they came back. Which possibly could be too late for Johnnie Ryan, because way back in my aching noggin was a thread of memory about her being a friend of Bess's visiting from out of town. Detroit, or Salt Lake, or someplace. Timbuktu, for all the good trying to remember was doing me.

"Hey, Ryan! Wake up. The Captain wants to see you."

I opened my eyes to look at Desk Sergeant Colgan's ugly mug in the doorway.

"What?"

"You." Colgan jerked a thumb. "The Captain. Lift it, and move!"

As I got up by sections Lonnergon got all excited.

"Hey, if the dish is there, figure out an intro for me, will you?" he asked. "Boy, if I could just meet that doll . . ."

"You're wife wouldn't like it," I reminded him, and walked out with no more than four cylinders working.

You've probably jumped way ahead, so I'll come right to the point. The dish sitting in Cap Fallon's office was my dish last night. When I walked in and saw her, I felt like Micky Mantle had hit me, batting left.

"Hello, Sergeant," she said.

I WORKED my mouth, but no more than a grunt came out. I looked at Fallon, and with the look he gave me I could go find a nice hole in the floor.

"Sit down, Ryan," Fallon said. "You sick?"

"I'm fine, sir," I said, and sat down, not quite missing the chair.

"Good," Fallon grunted. He looked at my dish and smiled. "Lieutenant Beldon

needs some help. I'm giving her you."

"Lieutenant?" I gaped at my dish, but I couldn't believe it. No cop could be that beautiful. Not even a lady one. Also, a thing like this simply couldn't happen to me. I looked back at Fallon.

"Help, sir?" I murmured faintly.

He nodded, still smiling at my dish.

"That's right, Ryan," he said. "A dame hugger-mugger from Detroit's in town. The lieutenant has come after her."

"You want me to pick her up?" I asked, getting back some of my strength.

"No, Sergeant," the dish said gently, "we'll pick her up."

"What does she look like?" I asked, sticking to the point. "You've got a picture . . . Lieutenant?"

She gave me a nice smile and shook her head.

"No," she said. "The one we have on file wouldn't be much help now. She looks different these days. Her name's Marie Waldron, and she's as good as any man hugger-mugger. Very tough. She fakes using a gun, and then saps her victims. She left Detroit when we got too close. We heard she came here, so I came here to find her . . . and take her back."

"But you'd know her if you saw her?" I said.

"I think so, but I'm not sure. I do know how she works, though, and that's what I'm counting on. But I'll need your help."

I nodded as though to say that would be nice, but I wasn't thinking it particularly. In my aching head I was thinking that something seemed wrong with the picture. But what I didn't know. As you probably know, a hugger-mugger is a form of low life that preys on couples making with the smooth in a parked car when it's nice and dark. He beats up the guy with a gun butt or a sap and takes all he has on him. Often he does worse than that to the girl. We're bothered with them in our town from time to time, but of late there hadn't been any trouble. That a hugger-mugger who

wore skirts had arrived wasn't too big a surprise. But that they'd send this beautiful cop dish all the way from Detroit to grab her was something out of the ordinary. Why not buzz us on the phone, or write? We could do the job and save them money. But maybe the cops worked different in Detroit, or the lace pants squad does, anyway.

"Something bothering you, Ryan?" Fallon asked in a voice that shook me loose from what I was thinking.

"There's a lot of places where the type works in this town, sir," I said slowly. "I was wondering how the . . . Lieutenant planned to lay her hands on this one."

"Lieutenant Beldon has some ideas on that," Fallon said gruffly. "Leave the details to her. You just take orders, see?"

How far do they push a guy down? For a split second I toyed with the idea of turning in my tin. I didn't know what orders I was going to get, but I was pretty sure I wasn't going to like them. After my big mouth last night? Lieutenant Beldon? Oh brother!

"Yes sir," is what I said to Fallon.

He smiled some more at my dish. "You want to brief him on those ideas now?" he asked.

"No, I think later," she replied. If she looked at me, I didn't see, for I was hunting that hole in the floor. "I'd like to meet Sergeant Ryan here at six o'clock, if that's all right? There are some places I want to go to, and I can outline my plans while we're doing that. Will six be all right, Sergeant?"

"He'll be here," Fallon answered for me. He gave me a nod. "As of now you're relieved of all other duties, Ryan. Better get some sleep if you can. You don't look so good. Report here at six."

"Yes, sir," I said and got up. I looked at the lovely smile on the lovely lieutenant's face, and understood how a guy can actually kill a beautiful woman. "At six . . . sir," I said and got out of there.

GUESS how I spent the rest of the day? You're right. Trying to make up my mind between my gun and jumping out a high window. That and catching the first train out of town with the few bucks I have in the bank. Though Sam Campion had saved my life twice in Korea, I could have killed him if I could have got my hands on him, but I didn't know where he was. Both he and Bess should burn in oil for pulling a gag like that on me. Me and my big mouth! The things that had come out of it and gone right in Lieutenant Belldon's shell-pink ears. I wished that Antoine Cadillac had dropped dead before founding Detroit. I wished that I could drop dead, myself. At a couple of minutes to six I went down to Headquarters and up to Fallon's office.

She was there waiting, and did you ever see six million dollars on legs? That was the Lieutenant, dressed like Mrs. Moneybags had asked her to drop around and meet the British Ambassador. As any of the boys downtown will tell you I'm a pretty mean dresser myself, but standing there in front of her I felt like I should have a can of ashes in my hands.

"Good evening, Sergeant," she said, and her smile was melted honey in my eyes.

I suddenly realized Fallon wasn't there, and I took the bull by the horns, or whatever you're supposed to do.

"Look, Lieutenant," I said, "why not just take my gun and shoot me? I'm an awful big laugh when I fall down."

You know what she did? She stepped close and patted my cheek.

"You're my boy, Sergeant," she said. "Shall we get started?"

She walked by me out the door. When I could think, I followed her, whanging my shoulder on the jamb as I went through. Down front at the curb was a car. Maybe five or six thousand bucks would get you one like it. The lieutenant got in behind the wheel and nodded at me.

"Get in, Sergeant. Marie goes for class,

so we're class tonight. Know any cheap, gaudy spots where nice people like us would go slumming?"

I got in and got my foot off my tongue. "Plenty," I said. Then because I couldn't help it, I asked, "What the gag? I mean, Lieutenant."

She touched something that made a soft whispering under the hood and smiled at me.

"No gag, Johnnie, business," she said. "And let's drop the Lieutenant thing. You were really wonderful last night."

"Yeah," I said.

"You were, and I didn't want to shut you up. It's all right. Don't you want to go with me tonight?"

I smelled a mouse, or thought I did, which was the same thing. I decided that two could play at whatever the hell we were playing.

"To the moon, if needs must," I said. "Let's move, Lieutenant. I'll whistle when I spot one of the places I know. You can start by turning left at the next corner."

She gave me a funny look, and then slid away from the curb.

The lieutenant turned left at the corner and I let her roll us along several blocks in silence while I did what thinking I could. Sometimes I can be bright, too, and this was one of those times. I finally glanced at the lieutenant out the corner of my eye, and instantly got the urge to kiss her, but I didn't. I was way ahead of tonight's routine, and I could wait.

"Marie picks her victims, eh?" I finally broke the silence.

She gave me a look like my report card was all A's.

"That's right," she said. "She haunts the gaudy jaunts until a couple of slummers come in. They have to be a little high, of course. Could you pretend being high, Sergeant?"

I let the crack whiz by and nodded.

"Yes, sir," I said very respectful like. "Then what?"

"She follows them when they leave and tails them in her car. If they go home or to a hotel, it's a night wasted. Usually, though they park someplace. Marie gives them a little time, and then does her stuff."

It was all new to me like last week's newspaper, but I didn't comment.

"Marie know you by sight?" I asked.

The lieutenant chuckled, and I could guess why. "No," she said. "And if you're worried, Sergeant, I don't think she knows you, either. For one thing, she hasn't been here for more than two or three days. For another, she doesn't mingle with her kind. She's a lone wolfess."

"A lupine, you mean," I said. "But I wasn't think thinking about Marie."

"What?"

"There's not a crumb-bum in town who doesn't know me," I said. "Any joint we go in, the word will be passed quick who's with the lovely lady."

She smiled, and it was all for me. "Thank you, Johnnie," she said. "You said as much last night, but I didn't think you meant it then. We'll just have to take that chance . . . and hope."

THAT put it right back in my lap so I shut up. A couple of more blocks down I told her to pull in and park. She did, and when she got out, she whispered, "Remember, pretend you're high."

I was already half drunk with her perfume so the rest wasn't going to be hard. I led her into a place where your mother wouldn't care to see you and found an empty booth. When I ordered Scotch for us both, she frowned. I let the waiter go away and gave her a blank look.

"You ever see slummers lap ginger ale?" I asked.

She let that slide, and, when the Scotch came, she did as well on hers as I did on mine. Somehow I got the feeling she needed that sun-downer as much as I did. Anyway, we sat there for about half an hour and talked about this and that. I tried to turn

the conversation to personal things, but the lieutenant was on duty, and that was that. So we just talked about nothing, and tried to look and act what we were supposed to be.

"Marie's not here," she finally said. "Let's try another place. A little better one. Maybe Marie's raised her sights."

We tried one, and then another one, and then three or four more. In one of them I ordered us dinner, and in every one of them I ordered us Scotch. About the seventh place we hit a lovely soft red glow started to show in her cheeks.

"Having fun, Lieutenant?" I asked.

"It's Betty," she said, and smiled. "I told you three places back. Yes, I suppose so. I wish we'd find Marie, though."

"We could go park," I suggested.

"Easy, Sergeant! Strictly business."

I made like tipping my hat. "How long have you known Bess?" I asked.

She gave me a quick funny look I didn't get, and said, "We were in school together."

"Tell me more," I said. "About you."

"Much too dull." She grinned at me. "Instead you tell me about you."

"You've heard it all," I said straight faced. "How long have you been in this business?" I asked.

"Four years."

I had to raise my eyebrows. A lieutenant in four years? I'd been ten, taking three off for Korea, and I was only sergeant. I kind of began to smell that little old mouse again.

"They promote pretty fast in Detroit," I said casually.

She smiled at me sweetly. "Yes, they do," she said.

I had another question ready, but I didn't get the chance to push it off my tongue. The lieutenant suddenly leaned toward me and took one of my paws in her soft, lovely two hands. And she looked into my eyes like we were alone at last after the wedding.

"I think Marie just came in, she whispered. "Yes, I'm sure it's her. No, not now. Look at me. Look interested, you bum!"

I had to try? I did even better. I bent my head quick and kissed her hard on the mouth.

"Sorry, but that's for real," I mumbled, letting go her mouth.

I leaned back like a count of nine wasn't half enough, and tried to look around and see people and things.

"At the bar," I heard the lieutenant's shaky whisper. "Black hat and dress. You shouldn't have done that, Johnnie."

I shouldn't have done what? I looked at the bar, and at the dame all in black standing there. A very hard flat face, but she did have other features. A guy standing next to her moved close and said something, but the look she gave him moved him away quick. She looked over across at me, and I gave her a silly smile. She looked away, and I looked down at the lieutenant.

"You sure?"

"Positive," she said.

I had a thought. Not bright for me as a man with this lovely, lovely lieutenant, but bright for me as a cop.

"I can take Marie for you right now," I said. "Save gas on that expensive buggy."

"No!" she hissed at me. "There'd be a disturbance, and I don't want one. We do it my way, Sergeant! With no publicity!"

That last put us back in business again. Okay by me. It was nice kissing the lieutenant, and everything went on the expense account, so I should want to wind it up quick?

"Yes, sir," I said dead pan. "Now what?"

She gave me that funny look again, and then one of pure steel that gave me a kind of a jolt. Of course, I'd never before seen an angel look hard as nails.

"Just follow my leads," she said, and

picked up her drink, and smiled quietly.

There's no use my trying to describe the next ten minutes or so because I don't know the words. I can only say that the theatre sure missed a perfect bet in the lieutenant, and, in less than ten minutes, damned if I wasn't thinking like a half-spiffed slummer all crazy to get this baby doll alone in a parked car.

"Let's get out of here, darling," she suddenly said a shade loud. "Let's go for a ride, honey."

"Let's," I said eagerly, and threw some bills on the table like they were clogging my pockets.

I GOT to my feet like what I was supposed to be, but the Scotch hadn't caved in my head, yet. I was still a cop and partly thinking like one, too. That's why I took a look at every face as we walked out. And got a break for me and the lieutenant. I-mean there wasn't a guy or a gal in that place I knew. Or knew me, I was sure. What might happen once in a hundred joints I visited in town had happened. If the dame in black was this Marie Waldron they wanted in Detroit, it was all up to her, now. There wasn't anybody around who could put a flea in her ear.

When we reached the car door, the lieutenant leaning nice but heavily against me, she whispered, "You drive. To the loneliest, darkest spot you know. Go slow and make a few turns getting there. We don't want to lose her."

"If she comes," I couldn't help adding.

The lieutenant patted my hand and fumbled with the other for the door handle.

"She'll come," she said, like the two of them had arranged it.

I helped her into the car and went around and in behind the wheel. It was dark by then, so after getting her to tell me where the light switch was, I took a quick fifteen secofid course on that buggy's instrument panel. Somehow I got it started and toolled us away from the curb into a little bit of

passing traffic. So help me, the thing practically was thought controlled. I mean, you just sort of sat back and away you went.

I knew a dandy spot for smooch just on the edge of town, so I started block-weaving in that general direction as ordered. Truth to tell, though, I sort of hoped Marie Waldron wouldn't pick on us. Or if she did to at least take lots of time getting down to business. It was very nice the way the lieutenant leaned against my shoulder, not saying anything, but keeping her eyes fixed on the rear view mirror. Very, very nice indeed! A situation that could be perfect, if she didn't have the rank.

"Bingo!" she suddenly murmured. "A car's been following us for ten minutes. It must be Marie. How long now?"

"Couple of minutes," I replied. Then I asked, "And when we get there, what?"

I thought she chuckled and was sure she moved a bit closer.

"Didn't you ever park with a girl, Sergeant?"

"Sure."

"Then you know. I'll keep watch your side, and you keep watch my side. Have you got a gun?"

"I'm a cop," I said simply. "Of course I have a gun."

"A detective," she said. "Remember?"

I let it go. She'd given me my orders, and brother I knew, how I was going to carry them out!

Five minutes later we were parked under some trees almost at the edge of a little lake. I'd doused the lights, even the dash glow, and it was like being in a bucket of ink. I felt her tremble slightly, and realized then that I was trembling some, myself.

"Well?" she whispered.

The way I swung around and reached was the tip-off. She went rigid for an instant.

"Just in a business way, Sergeant," she said in a small voice.

I didn't say anything. I had her in my arms by then, and the moon came up all studded with twinkling comets. You can say there's no such thing as real love quick, like you pull a trigger, but you're wrong. There is. I've had it. And the lieutenant has had it, too. It was come-here-forever for each of us the instant we kissed. She clung to me and kept murmuring my name, and she could have been the Police Commissioner from Detroit for all that rank bothered me.

It was wonderful, and for me it could last forever. I forgot where I was. Just who I was with. I guess the lieutenant remembered both for she suddenly pushed me back hard.

"Not like that now, darling. We've got a job . . ."

That's as far as she got. The door on her side jerked open, and a blinding flash beam pinned us like flies.

"Hold it, chumps! This is a gun. Come out slow!"

THE voice was like gravel going down the drain. I couldn't see any gun, but that's not what bothered me so much. I couldn't feel mine on the seat where I'd placed it when I doused the car lights. It had slipped off onto the floor during the clinch. If the voice back of that flash beam did have a gun, the detail was certainly all fouled up. It had been a lovely clinch . . . at a wrong time.

"Don't shoot!" I said in a squeaky voice. "You can have all I've got! Just don't shoot us, please!"

The gravel going down the drain laughed, and the beam came up higher to catch me fuller in the face. I tried to look scared, which wasn't too hard, and tried to think up a play after I was out of the car. Then all of a sudden, it happened!

My chick streaked up both hands and dived out the door head first, jet propelled. A very unpretty curse hit the night, and then came the thud of the two of them

hitting the ground. I was in action by then and went out that side of the car fast, too, but not fast enough. In the glow of the light that was loose on the ground I saw the lieutenant grab and upflung wrist by her two hands, twist, and heave. It was the prettiest bit of judo you ever saw. Something in black rose up and over the lieutenant's shoulder and came down on the ground like a half ton of dead beef, and lay still.

"Hey!" I heard my own voice yelp. "We used that one in Korea!"

"Where I learned it, but never used it," I also heard the lieutenant pant. "Give me your cuffs quickly."

I gave her my cuffs and struggled for speech. "Korea, you?" I finally managed. "Wait a minute here!"

The lieutenant paid no attention. She cuffed Marie Waldron's hands behind her back and picked up the flash. Next she picked up Marie's old .38 gun and broke it. It was empty. Then she walked over to me, not shining the light too much in my eyes.

"The WAC's, Johnnie," she said softly. "Lieutenant Beldon. Get it now?"

I was beginning to but only slowly, "You're not a cop?" I gagged. "But what . . . ?"

"Nobody said I was," she stopped me. "But after last night I thought it a good idea if I pretended rank on you, Sergeant. Captain Fallon was glad to cooperate. He's a very understanding man, so he let you think it, too."

It seemed to get worse every time I opened my mouth, but I couldn't keep it shut.

"A *WAC* lieutenant?" I gasped. "Sent here by the Detroit cops to bring back that dame here?"

"No," she stopped me, and nodded back with her head. "Marie's a WAC who went from bad to worse and deserted. We handle our own, too, just like the M.P.'s and the Shore Patrol. We've been after her

six months. When we heard she was here, I was sent to get her. My last assignment of duty, I guess. It'll be three years next week. I'm getting out."

"But Cap Fallon . . . ?" I began and stumbled.

"Was asked to give me any help I needed. I didn't let you take her in that place because that kind of publicity wouldn't help recruiting. It was much better this way. Or wasn't it? It had its good points."

That last made my heart jump, but I was kind of a little sore.

"Last night at the Campions," I growled. "You could have told me, and not let me . . . ?"

"You gave me a chance?"

That stopped me, and I was thinking up something else to say next when she came up real close.

"I've wanted to meet you for a long time, Johnny Ryan," she said softly. "Sam and Bess have talked so much about you. Well, I did last night, and I thought you and your big mouth were awfully cute. So I got your nice, understanding Captain Fallon to cooperate. Something you want to say, Sergeant?"

There were some things I could have said. How it was a nice break Marie Waldron happened to come into that joint while we were there. How it was a nice break she picked on us and not any one of the Lord knew how many other couples smooching around town. And how it was a nice break Marie didn't carry a loaded gun. And a couple of other things, too. However, a series of breaks like that only come to you about once, so why quibble about it?

Instead, I said, "You get what you go after, don't you?"

She lifted her face and smiled, "That I do, Sergeant," she said. "So come here and kiss me!"

"Yes, Lieutenant," I said. And did.

* * *

LETTER of the LAW

By
Dennis Wiegand

Benji was only a reform school punk, but he'd learned tricks which surprised even the FBI. . . .

BENJY growled, "Look, Flatfoot, stop following me around. This is a big hotel and I'm not the only character in this lobby."

"Yeah, but you're just the fresh punk I'd like to hang something on," said Belcher, the house detective. "Just let one o' them ashtrays turn up missin' and I'll be breathin' down your neck."

"Aw, nuts! Just because I made one little mistake. Just because a guy gets put on parole. . . ."

"One little mistake," snorted Belcher. "Huh, you mean five little mistakes one right after the other."

"Boy, if I wasn't in uniform right now I'd—" threatened Benji.

"You'd what, punk?" The hotel officer sneered. "You couldn't get into a *real* uniform with your record. Can't even wear a real bell-boy's getup because you can't be trusted in the rooms."

"Aw, drop dead," advised Benji resignedly. "Two guys with rods in shoulder holsters been mousin' around this



"Lift their guns, punk," said Belcher. "From behind."

lobby for the last three days and you don't even come to long enough to ask 'em how come."

As soon as he'd said it, Benjy Polvic regretted having opened his mouth. After all, even a small-timer like Benjy has no use for a squealer. Back in the reform school passing a tip-off was considered just about as unhealthful a recreation as a growing boy, who wanted to keep right on growing, could engage in.

But the house officer had twisted the blade just a little too much.

Benjy looked down disgustedly at his Imperial Hotels Corporation page boy's uniform. Heck of a getup for a guy who should be wearing a paratrooper's suit, or one of those sharp new Air Force deals. But he, Benjy Polvic, parolee, didn't even rate the trust and confidence that went with a bell-boy's uniform because a bell-boy had entrée to the guests' rooms.

"What two guys are packin' heaters in my lobby?" requested Belcher, dragging Benjy roughly into the shelter of a clump of artificial palm trees.

"Let go of me, you tinhorn shamus," Benjy yelped. "I was just kiddin' you. Anyhow, two guys with guns aren't just a kid without even a shiv. You might get hurt."

This elaborate concern for his welfare didn't fool Belcher for a minute. Like all his kind, Belcher knew, this punk hated the sight of a uniform. Funny quirk in the kid that he should be so crazy to wear one himself . . . as long as it wasn't police blue. Belcher'd worn the blues himself for nearly twenty years, until he'd been shot up so badly in a running gunfight that he could no longer walk a regular beat. He knew Benjy's kind, all right.

"Don't give me that," growled Belcher, twisting the thin arm. "Come on, out with it. Which two guys? Or do you want a quick trip back to that exclusive boy's school your rich uncle, the sheriff, sent you to?"

"Okay, okay," muttered Benjy, perspiring under the stress of pain. "I'll learn to keep my big mouth shut next time. But it's that nice, quiet-lookin' young guy in the gray pinstripe suit, the one over by the phone booths. And that other young guy in the tan suit, pretendin to read a newspaper. The one in the big green chair."

Belcher peered out into the huge expanse of the lobby. There seemed to be at least a hundred people lounging about or hurrying through on one errand or another. The two young men Benjy pointed out would have been invisible, so neatly did they blend into the normal confusion of the great room, had there been no special reason for taking note of them.

"You sure those guys are loaded?"

Benjy rubbed his arm tenderly. "Aw, you big ape, just because you don't know your job it don't signify I'm goin' to miss somethin' like that on two guys who been under my nose for three days. I'm waltzing around this lobby all day long emptying ashtrays and calling characters to the phone."

"You'd better be right," said Belcher, loosening his own gun in its shoulder holster. "You go over and get that one in the gray suit. Tell him the house dick—I mean, the house officer wants a word with him in his office. I'll get the other one. If it looks like trouble, just flop onto the floor and stay out of the way."

"Me take a dive for the floor?" scoffed Benjy. "Nuts!"

"Yeah, you'd make a good soldier," said Belcher with heavy-handed irony. "Yeah, maybe for the first five minutes of your first battle. Go on, now. Get that mug into my office."

WITHIN a few minutes Benjy and the man in gray, who preceded him without a word, met Belcher and the man wearing the tan suit in the service corridor outside Belcher's tiny office.

"Looks like he got us both, Hank," said the young man in gray, grinning at the other.

"Just step inside," ordered Belcher. The door closed behind the quartet, Benji having quietly invited himself in to see the show.

"Shall we let him have it, Cothran?" inquired the man called Hank.

"Sure, why not? After all, he's no dope. He picked us out of that mob in the lobby."

The man called Cothran thrust a long slender hand inside his coat. Belcher's stubby .38 flashed into sight, arresting the gesture.

"Not bad at all," murmured Benji, admiringly. "Humphrey Bogart couldn't have pulled that rod so quick."

"Shut up and lift their guns, punk," said Belcher. "From behind. You guys cross your hands in back of your necks."

"I hardly think this will be necessary, officer," laughed Cothran. "I was just reaching for my credential case."

"Yeah?" said Belcher skeptically. "Well, reach for it again and toss it over here on the desk. But remember I know you guys are carrying guns and I'm not taking foolish chances."

The black leather folder landed on the desk blotter with a dull splatting sound. It jolted open, revealing a badge and identification card.

"Hunh," grunted the house officer. "Big stuff. You got one of these, too?"

For answer the man in tan tossed an identical folder on the desk. Belcher examined both carefully, checking the photographs.

"I guess you have a right to carry rods," he conceded, disappointedly. "And I guess I got no right to ask why you're loafin' around in my lobby."

"As a matter of fact," said Cothran, quietly smiling, "we were about to ask for your help. We haven't been able to make any headway with this case for three days

now; and the way you picked us up was pretty impressive. Shows you know what goes on in that lobby."

"We'd better get rid of the youngster here first, though," suggested Hank.

"Let him stay," said Belcher gruffly. "The punk's the one who tipped me you were here. He knew you were here for the past three days. Just told me. I guess he doesn't have anything against Uncle Sam just yet. 'Course the county sheriff can't get no cooperation out of him."

"I'll bet he doesn't know this hotel's lobby is being used as a letter-drop," said Cothran, grinning at Benji.

"Let who drop?" demanded Benji. "Nobody dropped any dame around here. Not so's you could notice anyhow; and they always raise a row when some guy tries to drop 'em. Don't take the FBI to find it out, either."

"No, that's not the idea," laughed Cothran. "We mean that because this lobby is a crowded public place it's being used as a place for agents to turn their reports in to the man who, in turn, delivers them on up the line to the men at the top who don't want the agents to know who they are."

"Sounds like the movies," Belcher said, snorting.

"Sort of a mail box, huh?" mused Benji.

"What's this guy look like?" Belcher asked.

"That's just it. We don't know."

"What about the guy who tipped you off? Why not bring him over to make the identification?"

"He's dead," injected Hank curtly.

"Well, I know you can't tell us what these guys are agents for, but I guess it ain't no vacuum cleaner company," said Belcher. "Sure would like to help nail the rat, but I don't see what I can do."

"We don't want to arrest him," explained Cothran. "Not right now. We just want to see whom he contacts. We'll

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"—AND HOPE TO DIE!"

By J. L. BOUMA

It seemed to Frank that he stood looking down at the battered body of an utter stranger, instead of his wife. Could the hatred that had filled that twisted, slender woman be strong enough to outlive her—to reach out and drag him ever closer to the gas chamber?

EARLY that Sunday morning, while Ginnie still slept, Frank slipped out of his pajamas and into a pair of swimming trunks. He frowned at his wife, at the rumpled blonde hair, the lovely face so soft and innocent in sleep. And it seemed impossible that last night her face had been hard, her voice brittle as she spoke of leaving him.

It was hard to accept, very hard to realize that their marriage was on the rocks. Things had gone so well in the beginning. He'd had a solid bank account, the new convertible, plans for opening his own accounting office. But the plans had gone with the bank account, and the convertible was a wreck because of Ginnie's casual recklessness.





A shadow moved from the deeper shadow of the shanty, and they saw a gun in the man's hand.

Frank Reed went out into the early sunlight. He ran across the beach and plunged through the surf. He swam hard and steadily, then turned on his back and floated, and thought that a year as Ginnie's husband had brought him a little happiness and a lot of regrets.

He thought of Laura, Ginnie's sister, and of the vast difference between the two girls. Laura, an efficient and responsible person, was a secretary at the accounting firm where Frank worked. He

had been going steady with her when Ginnie came west from New York, where she'd failed to make the grade as a model. At their first meeting he'd sensed allure, glamour, and these intangibles had so dazzled him that Laura had seemed dull by comparison. But lately, it had been hard for him to escape the thought that he had married the wrong sister.

He knew he had hurt Laura by marrying Ginnie, and Ginnie had hinted as much on their honeymoon, making a joke of Laura's weeping bitter tears on her pillow.

Ginnie would not have cried. He had often wished for her tears during their ever-increasing quarrels, but there were no tears in Ginnie. She had developed a way of taunting him, then sitting back with a narrow smile and watching and waiting for his reaction.

Frank caught a breaker to shore. He walked across the beach. At this far end there were only a few scattered cottages. He glanced at his neighbor's cottage. A man named Barton had moved in there four days ago. He was an odd character. He had a small terrier, and the dog had barked shrilly and for a long time last night, almost driving Ginnie to distraction.

Strange about that phone call yesterday. A man calling himself Holden had questioned Frank about Barton, saying he was a friend. It didn't make sense.

Frank was passing Barton's cottage when he saw the terrier. The small dog lay stiff on its side against a sand dune, eyes open and glazed, its pink tongue protruding from sharp little teeth. Frank touched the animal. It was rigid.

He rose, frowning, and glanced at the cottage. Abalone shells lined the walk to the stone steps. He went up to the door and knocked, but no one answered. He glanced at his sandy feet, waiting. Something white caught his eye, half wedged beneath an abalone shell. He picked it up, a small envelope, sealed, with a piece of thin cardboard inside. Tiny beads of moisture dammed

the envelope as if it had been out all night.

Frank knocked again, vaguely studying the envelope. Still no answer. He stepped to the front room window, cupped his hands around his eyes, and peered inside. The first thing he saw was an overturned chair, then the pajama-clad legs.

What is this? he thought. He tried the door. It opened and he went inside and bent over the body. It was Barton, a husky man in his middle thirties. Frank swallowed. Barton wore only his pajama bottoms. His ribs and chest were discolored by welts and bruises, and the soles of his feet were a mass of blisters. His face was unmarked, but there was a blue-black swelling above his left temple. Frank bent down again and listened to faint and labored breathing.

Frank tossed the envelope on a coffee table and looked around. The room was a shambles. The overstuffed chair and the couch had been slashed, the cotton stuffing torn out. Pictures had been taken from the walls, ripped apart. A few scatter rugs lay in a heap in a corner.

The bedroom had received similar treatment, the mattress slashed wide open, blankets and clothing scattered. Open dresser drawers revealed a confusion of shirts, socks, underwear. The small kitchen was a wreck.

There was no phone in the house. Frank ran through the sand to his beach shack. The door slammed shut behind him. From the bedroom, Ginnie said angrily, "Don't make so damn much noise!"

Frank dialed the police. He told them what had happened and asked them to send a doctor. When he hung up, he found Ginnie standing in the doorway, her eyes wide and eager. "Who beat up Nick Barton?"

"How would I know?" He looked at her. "How'd you learn his first name?"

She lifted an eyebrow, and a faint smile lurked at the corners of her mouth. The thin nightgown clung to the lines of her

ripe body. "I'm the curious type, darling, so I asked the delivery boy, and he told me. I felt there was something strange about that man."

"You'd better put some clothes on. The police might come here."

She laughed. "I don't think they'd mind seeing me in my nightgown, do you, darling?"

FRANK'S mouth tightened. He went into the bathroom and had started the shower when he heard the back door slam. He peered at a slant through the window and saw Ginnie running through the sand in her robe toward Barton's cottage. Damn her! Be a hell of a note if the police came while she was there satisfying her curiosity.

Frank showered quickly, dressed in slacks and a sports shirt. Ginnie was back by the time he entered the front room, stretched out on the couch smoking a cigarette. "What was the idea of going over there?"

"I wanted to see him."

He flipped a cigarette from the pack. "How about some breakfast?"

"Make it yourself. I'm not hungry."

"Good God, Ginnie, why do you always have to start a day with this attitude? Especially when we're on our vacation."

She raised up on an elbow. "Oh, shut up! You hundred-dollar-a-week accountant. That's all you'll ever be, just another jerk that adds up other people's profits. A fifty dollar apartment and movies on Saturday night. And a two-week vacation when we can't even afford to leave town. So you rent this lousy beach shack and make like a second honeymoon. Well, I'm sick of it, and I'm sick of you."

"One of these days you're going to say too much."

"Oh, go to hell."

"Fine. That solves everything." He grabbed her wrist and jerked her to her feet. "I told you to get dressed!"

"Keep your damn hands off me!"

"I said get dressed!"

He pushed her toward the bedroom, and she turned quick as a flash and slapped him across the mouth. He stared at her, taut with shock. Things had never gone this far before.

The sound of the slap seemed to hang in the room. He took a step toward her, and his legs didn't belong to him. A little fight leaped to Ginnie's eyes. She screamed, "Don't you hit me! Don't—"

The doorbell cut her short. For a second she stared at him, then darted into the bedroom, and slammed the door. Frank turned and took a deep breath as the bell sounded again. His face flushed and his hands shaking, he answered the bell.

A thick man in a gray suit stood there. He had a heavy face and intent eyes that looked at Frank in an inquisitive sort of way. "Police. Dooling is the name." He showed Frank a badge. "You Reed, the neighbor who called?"

"That's right. His voice came out hoarse, and he cleared his throat. "How is he?"

"They must have used a baseball bat on him. Didn't break anything though, except they almost broke his skull. The Doc says concussion. Soles of the feet probably burned with lighted cigars. Not sure yet. But the Doc says Barton is rugged and should be okay in a few days." He glanced at the open door. "Your wife?"

Frank flushed at the faint amusement in Dooling's eyes. The detective had obviously heard part of the argument he was having with Ginnie. "Yes."

"Mind if we go inside? I want to learn all I can about this Barton character, and women are sometimes more observing than men."

Frank held the door open. He glanced toward Barton's cottage and saw an ambulance and police car parked there. Ginnie came from the bedroom wearing her green satin robe. She had brushed her hair and

recaptured that look of soft innocence she had in sleep. She smiled demurely at Dooling as Frank introduced them. The detective sat down. He said, "How well do you folks know Nick Barton?"

"We don't," Frank said. "He moved in four days ago. Came in a cab with his luggage. I tried talking to him once, but he gave me the cold shoulder, so after that I didn't bother."

"Then how'd you happen to enter the place?"

Frank told about the terrier. "I thought maybe the dog had been poisoned or something, and that maybe Barton didn't know."

"This your place?"

"No. We live in town, but we're on our vacation." Frank paused. "What do you make of it?"

"I'd say somebody was looking for something," Dooling said dryly. "Can you tell me anything else about him?"

"Yes. Funny damn thing, too. A man who identified himself as Mr. Holden phoned here yesterday morning. He sounded friendly enough. Wanted to know when Barton got here, how he'd arrived, and if he'd had any callers. I thought it was a gag, because when I asked him he said he was a friend of Barton."

Dooling scribbled notes as Frank talked. "Holden, eh? Did Barton have any callers?"

"One that I know of," Ginnie said. "He came yesterday afternoon. A man wearing what I think they call a pea jacket and one of those black caps with a shiny visor."

"What kind of car was he driving?"

"An old dark sedan. I hardly noticed." She frowned prettily, tucked her feet under her, and covered them with her robe. "That Barton was sure an odd character. He either sunned on his porch or stayed in the house. A catering service brought his meals. Who is he, anyway?"

"I've got an idea, but I want to check a few things first." The detective rose. "You folks going to be around?"

"We'll be here another week," Frank said. He took a card from his wallet. "My town and business address, just in case."

"Fine." The detective nodded good-by and left. Frank stood at the window and watched him walk heavily through the sand toward Barton's cottage. Two men in white jackets had wheeled Barton out on a stretcher and were lifting the stretcher into the ambulance. Men in uniform and plain clothes were going in and out of the front door.

GINNIE said, "It seems to me you're taking a lot for granted saying we'll be here another week. Or did you forget what I told you last night?"

Frank looked at her. "I didn't forget. I kind of hoped you'd have a change of heart, though."

"On your salary?"

"So that's where your heart lies. Listen, don't always be throwing my salary in my face. If you hadn't gone through our savings like a kid in a candy shop—"

"So that's my fault!"

Quick anger rose in Frank. His mouth set, he glared at Ginnie. Then he sighed. In a low voice he said, "Mine as much as yours, I guess. I should have clamped down a long time ago. Forget it—I'm only trying to save our marriage."

"It's done gone under the bridge, darling."

"All right. So you're leaving me. Where do you expect to go? And what do you intend to use for money?"

"I expect to go to San Francisco. You can certainly scrape up the bus fare. And I intend for you to send me fifty of your precious hundred every week."

He gave a hard laugh. "That'll at least leave me better off than I am now. When do you figure to leave?"

"I haven't made up my mind."

"Are you going to tell Laura? She's coming for lunch, you know."

"You tell her. I don't expect to be here."

You two can play house and pretend I don't exist."

He looked at her and shook his head slowly. "Oh, brother! And I thought I was getting the pick of the Dalton sisters when I married you."

He walked out hearing her laughter. He went to the garage. The convertible was only a little over a year old, but the fenders were battered, the car looking dusty and tired with age.

He reached his fishing pole down from its pegs. On the beach he took off his shoes and socks, rolled up his slacks, and dug into the wet sand for a couple of soft-shelled crabs. He cast out into the frothing surf. It was a fine day for fishing, but his heart wasn't in it.

In about half an hour he heard the convertible sputter as Ginnie backed out of the garage. She roared away, gears clashing, smoke spewing from the exhaust. He caught a nice croaker, a three-pounder at least. He cast out again. Hooks snagged on hidden rocks, breaking the leader, his last one. Well, the one fish was enough for lunch.

He was cleaning it in the kitchen when Laura drove up in her small coupe.

Frank went to the door. She came toward him smiling, slender and shapely in a yellow linen dress. Her ash-blonde hair was cropped short. She had the features of a mischievous child, the eyes of an assured woman.

"Am I early?"

"You're just right. Ginnie's gone somewhere, so there'll be just the two of us."

Her eyes clouded over. "You two've been at it again. Frank, I wish you and Ginnie would try and get along."

"Let's not talk about it, Laura." He turned back to the kitchen. "Look, how's about mixing the salad?" He grinned and tossed her an apron. "Tie this around your willowy waist."

She gave him a half smile, but only half. "Ginnie should be here."

They ate slowly, talking mostly about their work at the accounting firm. But conversation was an effort. Frank told her about his finding Barton, his fight with Ginnie, and their broken marriage. She hadn't mentioned a divorce. They would have to settle it sooner or later. Now that the break was certain, there was no use in putting it off. He hated the thought, but he hated worse the constant quarrels that were a drain, physically and emotionally.

Laura insisted on helping with the dishes. Then she got in her small coupe and drove away. Ginnie turned from the highway about an hour later. Frank was reading a magazine when he heard the bang and scrape of fender against wood, and he groaned. When Ginnie came in he said, "Take it a little easy next time, huh?"

"What?" She looked at him, her color high, her eyes shining oddly. She tossed her purse on the table, her movements tense, her body somehow vibrant with some hidden restraint.

"The car, the car—"

"I'm sorry, Frank."

"Where've you been? You sure soured lunch by not being here."

"I went for a drive. Then I remembered you saying Laura was coming, so I hurried back. I'm sorry, Frank."

She took the package of cigarettes from his shirt pocket. He gave her a light. She wrinkled her nose at him through the smoke, smiling in the old way. Then she sat next to him and leaned her head against his shoulder.

He gave her an oblique look of mild suspicion. "Twice in a row you're sorry. Now you cuddle. What gives?"

Her voice was low. "Be nice, Frank. Please. I've been thinking. Bad girl. Not very pleasant to her husband lately. I need to think a lot more, Frank."

He felt a rush of relief, sensed her warmth, the way it had been in the beginning. It seemed a miracle had happened, the two of them together like this, the

world outside. Hope entered his heart. He put his arm around her shoulder, drew her close.

"Frank, I need to spend some time with myself. San Francisco. Maybe a couple of weeks. Take stock. Find out what makes me tick. Can we swing it? Financially, I mean?"

"If that's what you want."

"It's what I need, Frank. This is a critical time in our lives. If we can cross this rough spot I think we'll be all right."

"I'm glad that at last we're behaving like sensible people. All right, you go to San Francisco."

"I thought I'd go tomorrow. Catch the evening bus. Be there Tuesday morning."

"I'll borrow a couple of hundred on my insurance. If that's enough to hold you."

"Plenty, darling."

"Make it worth while, baby. Think about it. We're still young. Don't let's throw away what we have now."

"Kiss me, Frank. . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

A Tour from Tijuana

HE DROVE into Surf City early next morning and borrowed the two hundred against his insurance. He cashed the check at the bank, feeling jubilant, as if his marriage were just beginning. Driving toward the beach along Broadway, he passed City hall. Curiosity prompted him to park. He walked through the marble corridor to the information desk and asked for Detective Dooling. The clerk directed him to Dooling's office.

The detective was in. He asked Frank to sit down. Frank said, "I thought I'd find out how Barton is getting along."

"He's all right. Stiff and sore and a headache, and I guess his feet hurt, but outside of that he's in good shape. He came out of it about noon yesterday and insisted on going to a private hospital.

Nothing much we could do about it. I talked to the Doc there a while ago, and he told me Barton wants out."

"Did he say who beat him up?"

"He refused to comment." The detective paused, gazed at the ceiling. "Nick Barton. The name was familiar, but I wasn't sure until I checked. Too bad we have nothing on him." He looked at Frank. "Did you ever hear the name Tony Poletti?"

"Of course. West coast racketeer and gambling czar. His trial in L. A. made headlines for weeks. When was it, seven-eight days ago he was sent up for income tax evasion?"

"Last Monday. He got two to ten, but I'll be surprised if he serves eighteen months. He owed the government something like a quarter of a million. Paid a lot of it off, of course. Made a big splurge of selling everything he owned to try and get off the hook. A used car lot, a couple of dives, two homes, his cars, even his tailor-made suits. And a fishing boat that docks right here in Surf City."

"I didn't know he used to operate down this way."

"He was spread out. There was a time when the Narcotics Bureau kept their eyes on that fishing boat because they thought Poletti was using it to run dope in from Mexico. But they never caught him with the goods."

"What's all this got to do with Barton?"

Dooling smiled. "It isn't generally known, but Barton was considered Poletti's brains. He worked behind the scenes. A lawyer by profession, but he's never practised. Poletti trusted him. They made a team."

"I'll be damned. What do you suppose he was doing living here on the beach?"

"Hard to tell. Could be that with Poletti in jail the boys are fighting amongst themselves to see who'll take over. Maybe Barton was one choice, but not the most popular. So he hides out for a while. They

trace him, work him over. That's only a guess, of course."

"Well, thanks for telling me. It's kind of a surprise."

"To a lot of people. See you around."

Frank drove home. Ginnie sniled when he came in, and he kissed her. "Here's the loot, baby. Two hundred smackers."

"I'm going into town after lunch. I need a few things. What'll you be doing, darling?"

"Probably fish."

"I called, and there's a bus leaving at six. But I want to buy my ticket this afternoon, so I won't have to stand in line this evening. We can eat dinner out."

Frank kissed her again, still jubilant. This was the way it should be, the way it was now. "Listen to this, Ginnie. I stopped and talked to Dooling. It seems our neighbor Barton is in the rackets—"

He saw her face go pale, her eyes grow enormous. "What?"

"You don't have to take it so hard."

"No, it was just—a shock to realize that we were living next door to a gangster."

"He was Tony Poletti's right-hand man. You remember reading about the trial?"

Ginnie turned to the kitchen. "Of course. Not our worry, though. You want an early lunch, darling? I'm starved."

They were eating at the kitchen table when the old dark sedan parked in the drive next door. A man got out. Frank went to the window. "Hell, it's Barton."

Ginnie caught her breath, turned in her chair. "That's the same sedan the man drove that came to see him the other afternoon."

They watched Barton walk gingerly to his front door. He bent over, obviously searching for something. Frank snapped his fingers. "I'll bet he's looking for that envelope. I forgot all about it."

"What envelope?"

"It was below his doorstep under an abalone shell, and I remember tossing it on his coffee table."

"He's coming over here."

Frank went to the front door. Barton was just turning up the walk. He wore high cotton house slippers, a gray suit, a white Panama. His face was pale, his eyes sunken in shadow pockets, and he walked gingerly and stiffly erect. He smiled and offered his hand. Frank took it, noticing that the man's eyes were expressionless as a cat's. His handshake was firm.

"Mr. Reed? I'm Nick Barton. I kind of got bounced around the other night—" He shrugged and grinned. "I came to thank you for finding me that morning and calling the Doc."

"Call it luck. I took a swim and the breakers carried me past your place. Then I ran across the dog."

"Too bad about Skip. Damn nice dog. They kicked him to death. Too much barking." His smile was stiff. "I wonder if coming in the house you happened to notice a small envelope—"

Frank nodded. "I found it. Pretty certain I put it on the coffee table in your place. Should still be there unless the police took it."

The skin tightened at Barton's mouth. "Did you open it, look inside?"

"Now look here—"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Reed. I'll look and see if it's still there."

Barton walked away and Frank went back in the house. Ginnie came from the bedroom dressed to go out. "What did he have to say?"

"Just what I thought—about the envelope. Seems to me, though, that the cops would have opened it."

"I guess." She kissed him. "Bye, darling. I'll be back around four."

THEY went out, and Frank watched her drive away. He went into the garage and took down his fishing pole. Then he remembered. Damn! He ran out along the drive, but the convertible was a speck on the highway. Now he'd have to catch the

bus into town if he expected to be fishing.

Barton was coming out of his cottage, going toward his car. Frank called to him and ran over. "Did you find it?"

"No," Barton said shortly. He waited until Frank came up to him, his cold eyes filled with something that might be suspicion. "Are you certain you put it on the coffee table?"

"Now that I think of it, positive. Try the police. Maybe they have it."

"No, Mr. Reed, they don't have it." He opened the car door.

"Say, if you're going into town, how about a lift? I was going fishing but I'm fresh out of hooks and leaders."

"Hop in."

Driving toward town, Barton said, "Your wife is the blonde young woman, isn't that right, Reed?"

Frank looked at him. "That's right."

"Did she go to the cottage while I lay unconscious?"

"What are you getting at, Barton?"

Barton didn't answer right away. He turned on Broadway. Two blocks down he stopped for a red light. "Your wife is a curious woman. I understand she has made inquiries about me."

"Barton, I don't know what this is all about, but let's just leave my wife out of it."

Barton pulled into a parking slot. He turned to Frank. "I asked you a question. Did your wife go to my cottage?"

"Go to hell, Barton. I don't happen to like your attitude." Frank opened the door and got out. He looked through the window at Barton. "Thanks for the lift." He turned and walked away.

Tough cookie, that Barton, he thought. The average man taking a beating like that wouldn't be able to look a man in the eye for a long time. But Barton had taken it in stride. No wonder he'd been up there with Tony Poletti.

He turned up Market Street toward a sporting goods' store. He crossed at the corner and had walked half a block when

he saw Ginnie crossing the big open parking lot on the next corner. She hurried across the street and turned up Sixth Avenue. When he reached the corner, it was to see her enter a small hotel, the Chandler. He stood quite still for a moment, thinking of friends, acquaintances she might know there. As far as he knew, there weren't any, so what in the world could she be doing there?

He drifted across the street from the hotel. Through the plate-glass windows he saw Ginnie at the desk talking to the clerk. She handed him something from her purse, and he wrote on a piece of paper which he handed her. Then she came out.

There was a queer churn in the pit of his stomach. He watched the way the sunlight brightened her hair, the swing of her walk, the way men turned to look at her. And without realizing it, he was following her, his eyes somber, his mouth grim.

The sidewalks were fairly crowded, but it wasn't hard to keep her in sight. Her next stop was a travel bureau on the corner of Imperial and Seventh. There were posters in the window, gay and colorful posters that promised adventure and romance in Paris, South America, Mexico.

He waited on the opposite corner, and it seemed a long time before Ginnie appeared. She turned right toward the bus depot on the next corner, and he started to follow, then found himself hesitating in front of the travel bureau. The fine warmth at what he'd considered their understanding had turned to suspicion. He remembered her sudden change yesterday. Now her visit to the hotel, the travel bureau.

He managed a smile and went inside. A thin dark girl leaned on the counter, writing. She looked up. "May I help you?"

He gave her a crooked grin. "I can't make up my mind where to take my vacation. Where do all the good-looking girls go?"

She laughed. "So that's your problem."

He widened his grin. "You know, girls

on the order of the blonde that was just in here.”

“She's going to Mexico.” The girl's eyes dropped to a pink slip of paper. Frank looked quickly. It was the carbon copy of a receipt. “An air tour. Twenty-one days. Five days in Mexico City, three in Acapulco—”

“Sounds fine. Can you let me see some folders?”

“Of course.” The girl turned to a rack of folders. Frank looked again at the receipt. Virginia Dalton, Chandler Hotel. She had used her maiden name. “Here you are,” he heard the girl say.

“When does the next tour leave?”

She laughed again. “The one the blonde is going on? Thursday morning from Tijuana. The limousine leaves here at six in the morning.”

Frank thanked her. He went out. He needed a drink. He needed a number of drinks. He felt as if the world had tilted, so that everything was out of focus. And vaguely, in the background of his mind, loomed the image of a faceless man. There had to be a man behind all this. Where else could she have gotten the money?

The accounting firm's offices were only a few blocks away. He hurried there. Laura was typing in her cubbyhole. She looked up startled at the expression on Frank's face. “What's wrong?”

“Tell me, Laura, have you lent Ginnie any money lately? And I don't mean a five or a ten spot, either.”

“Not since she came back from New York and moved in with me.”

“Well, we made up, or so I thought. She's supposed to leave for San Francisco this evening to straighten out. I gave her two hundred dollars: She had maybe fifty of her own. And just a while ago she paid cash for a package tour to Mexico that cost her over four hundred dollars.”

“You're kidding!”

“I wish I was.” He told her what he'd learned. “The Chandler Hotel. I'm going

there now. I want to check. There's something damn funny going on, and I want to know what it's all about.”

“I'll go with you.”

“No, better not. She thinks I'm home, and I'll have to hurry. I'll call you if anything develops.” He hurried out.

The clerk at Chandler Hotel was fat and wore glasses. A Miss Dalton? No, she hadn't registered yet, but was moving in this evening. Room 409. Nice double room.

Frank forced the words. “Is she alone? I mean, is there a man—”

The clerk blinked behind his glasses, the pink lips tightened. “Girl trouble, eh? Don't come to me with it, friend. She paid three days in advance, that's all I know. And there'll be nobody going up to her room.”

FRANK turned sharply and went out into the bright sunlight. He caught a cab to the beach. Ginnie wasn't back. He changed into trunks, took a blanket out on the hot sand. The sun burned his closed eyelids. How should he handle this? Tell her bluntly what he'd learned? No, that wouldn't work, wouldn't get him anywhere. He could imagine what would follow. . . .

All right, so I'm going to Mexico. What's it to you?

Where did you get the money?

That's none of your damn business.

You'd better tell me quick.

Go to hell.

Take it easy, baby, because you just might not ever get to Mexico. . . .

The thought sent a ripple of panic through him, for himself, for Ginnie, for what he might do if she pushed him too far. He tried to think. That envelope must hold the answer. She'd been nasty as hell all Sunday morning. But when she got back from her drive she'd changed, had suddenly clung to him, their future a promise. It was too pat. That and suddenly deciding to go to San Francisco.

And Barton worrying about the envelope.

Barton asking if Ginnie had entered the cottage while he lay unconscious. Barton so certain the police hadn't picked up the envelope.

He heard the convertible stop on the drive, and he pretended sleep. He hoped he could face her without showing his feelings. It was her move now, and he would let her make it. The bus left at six. He would be there when she boarded it.

He heard the front door open. "Frank, I thought you'd be fishing."

He rolled over on his stomach. "I quit. Get everything you need?"

"Uh-huh. My bus ticket, a scarf, a few other things. It's almost four, darling, and I still have to pack. You want to get dressed?"

"All right."

He got up and shook out the blanket. He went through the back door to the bathroom and took a shower, dressed in his best gray suit. He tried a smile in the mirror. He looked well and tanned, but the smile was a phony grimace around his mouth.

In the kitchen, he mixed a drink. He went to the bedroom and lounged in the doorway, the glass in his hand. "Want one?"

She was packing. She gave him a brief smile. "You look handsome. . . . No, thanks. Maybe a martini when we stop to eat."

"Can you get everything you'll need in one suitcase?"

She laughed, brushing a strand of hair from her forehead. He had never seen her looking so wildly happy. Something tore inside him. It wasn't he, making her happy.

"How long do you think I'm going to stay, darling?" She closed the suitcase, locked it. "There. Ready to go?"

They stopped at a restaurant on the edge of town. Then they drove on into town. The sun was a red disk low in the west. He looked at her. "Have a good time, baby. Don't bother to write unless you feel you want to."

He kissed her. She held him tight for a moment. "Take care of yourself, darling."

"Better get in line. You've only got five minutes."

"Aren't you going to see me off?"

He carried her suitcase inside, stood by as she got in line. The line moved. He watched her board the bus, walk down the aisle to a seat. She waved at him from the window, and he lifted a hand, smiled, and went back to his car.

IT HAPPENED as he expected it to happen. He followed the bus and watched Ginnie get off where it stopped by the railroad depot. She caught a cab back to the bus depot and hurried inside. A moment later she came out carrying her own suitcase in her right hand, a small leather case in her left. She took another cab to the Chandler Hotel.

Frank parked on the next street. A few pieces of the puzzle were falling in place. She would stay in her room, have her meals sent up, keep off the streets. And bright and early Thursday morning she would catch the limousine to Tijuana. And from there the plane to Mexico City.

What to do now? He wandered past the hotel, saw the clerk watching him from behind the desk. He crossed the street to a small bar and ordered a double Scotch. He sat on a stool facing the window, staring without expression at the hotel entrance.

His wife up there. Room 409. He swung on the stool and stared at himself in the bar mirror. Stared at Frank Reed, accountant, whose wife had shown him hell in one long year, who had belittled him, taunted him at every chance, who had lied to him.

He told himself to leave it alone. He told himself to walk away from it, forget it and Ginnie, but enough of her remained in him to break his heart.

He ordered another double Scotch, then several more. He noted vaguely that it was dark outside. His watch said quarter to

nine. Had he been here for that long?

He went out, feeling light-headed. He drifted across the street against on-rushing traffic, saw the clerk's eyes on him again as he stepped up on the sidewalk. He walked to the corner, turned left, peered down a dark alley. Ginnie up there. The mistake of his life up there, and he had things to tell her before making the grand exit. She could go to Mexico, but first he would tell her a few things.

He came down the alley, squinted up at a fire escape that was out of his reach. An ash can. He stood on it on uncertain legs, gripped the bottom rung of the iron ladder. It creaked but lowered with his weight. He climbed, reached the first iron stairs. The landings opened on hall windows, open to the summer heat. The fourth floor. He stepped across the sill into the hall. Room 409.

He knocked on the door and was vastly annoyed when she didn't immediately answer. So he turned the knob, and the door opened for him. No sound. Only the whisper of his hand along the wall. There was the light switch. The room became bright, startling bright. A cold prickle crept up the back of his neck. His cry was hoarse. “Ginnie!” He rushed to the bed.

He saw her face, blood-dark, one eye open, staring blindly at nothing. He saw the thick black tongue blocking the open mouth. Her slender throat was a twist of black and blue. “Ginnie!”

It was as if he were looking at the battered body of another stranger, instead of his wife.

He was suddenly cold sober, and he was trembling. He did not hear the elevator door slide open; he heard the stricken scream behind him, and he swung around on the stout woman who stood there, staring at Ginnie, her face chalk pale, her hand to her mouth. The woman screamed again.

No time for tears. Frank rushed out of the room, past the woman who sank down with a gurgling sound, past staring faces in

half-opened doorways, toward the window.

A man yelled, “Somebody call the police!”

He was out of the window, half falling, half sliding down the fire escape. Then he was running down the alley, turning on the next street, into the car, the car moving, a picture of Dooling in his mind. Dooling hearing Ginnie's scream yesterday morning, screaming “Don't you hit me!” Dooling looking at him curiously, adding two and two and coming up with what he would consider the right answer.

Husband beats wife. Wife moves to hotel. Husband finds her, kills her.

Sirens in the distance. He parked, not knowing the street, not caring. And he tried to think logical thoughts. It would take the police a while to get around to Frank Reed. They would check on a Miss Virginia Dalton, but it would be pure luck if they came up with anything before morning. They wouldn't catch on that Laura was a sister, either. Not right away. He had to see her, tell her, the sister. Tell Laura. Tell her for better or worse. He drove on.

CHAPTER THREE

Star Reach

THE apartment was near Cortez Park. Laura answered the bell. She stared at him. “Frank! What's happened?”

“Laura—” The word caught in his throat. He took a grip on himself. “Sit down, Laura. This is going to be tough.”

She sat down on a chair, her knees close together, and she looked up at him. Then he told her quietly and quickly about what had happened to Ginnie. He watched her face break, the tears that followed. Finally, she composed herself, and he told her the rest.

“But who would do a thing like that, Frank? And why?”

“I'd say Barton. Why, I don't know, except that the envelope is the reason she was

killed. I'm almost certain now that she took it, Laura. And Barton was suspicious of her."

"You say she picked up another suitcase at the depot."

"Yes. And I wish I'd had time to check her room to see if it was missing, but I didn't."

Laura blew her nose, stared at the floor. In a dull voice she said, "Something tells me I shouldn't be surprised. Ginnie'd been in trouble before. She always wanted things that were out of her reach. But she was never willing to give enough in order to get them. She quit every time the going got rough. First as a singer, then the modeling career, then her marriage."

"Let's not go over that now, Laura. Right now we have to think about things."

"About Barton?"

"Yes. He was beat up by unknown persons. So they were looking for something. Let's suppose it's the suitcase, or what's in the suitcase, rather. Ginnie got hold of it. Now let's suppose Barton has it again. All right. Now he certainly wouldn't be going back to his cottage."

"We could go there and find out."

"Maybe we will. I keep thinking of a man wearing a pea jacket and a black cap with a shiny visor."

"Merchant seamen wear them. Or fishermen."

"Right. And Poletti owned a fishing boat. Could be the present captain is the man who ran the boat for Poletti, and that he and Barton are friends."

"Who owns that cottage, Frank?"

"Say, that's a thought! I don't know who owns it. Wait a minute—we handle quite a few real estate accounts, don't we?" There was a classified directory by Laura's phone. Frank opened it on his lap. "Real estate. Here we are. Spectar & Co., Inc. I had lunch with Bill Spectar just before I went on my vacation. He might know something. Look up a few others while I call."

Most of the offices were closed this time

of night. Frank called Bill Spectar at his home. "Sorry, can't help you there, Frank. I don't know who owns that place."

Laura had a list of numbers written down when Frank hung up. He made four calls. The fifth call had him taking a deep breath.

"Yesh, I know the place you mean, Frank. Guy named Tanski owns it. We had a client interested in buying some beach property, and I called on Tanski to ask if he was interested in selling."

"What's Tanski's line?"

"He's a fisherman. I understand he owns a piece of a boat."

"You know the name of the boat, where it's docked?"

"No, but you ought to be able to find out in those joints around the waterfront. Just ask for Tanski. Joe Tanski. They probably all know him down along there."

Frank told Laura about it. "It's something to work on."

"Frank, do you think we should go to the police?"

"I don't know, Laura. I'd like to have a little more to give them. If I go to the police now they'll be interested in Frank Reed as a murder suspect, and they just might not listen to what I have to say. Or if they do, they might not act on it right away. I can't be certain."

"Frank, I'm going with you."

"No, Laura."

She looked at him defiantly, her face pale, her eyes large and somber. "I will not sit here in this apartment by myself. I don't think I could stand it." She rose. "I'll get a coat."

"Laura—" He gripped her shoulders. "You never as much as thought that I might have killed Ginnie, did you?"

Her eyes were steady on his. She said slowly, "No, Frank. I've known you too long, I guess. I've always felt you wouldn't lie to me, no matter what happens."

"Get your coat," he said thickly.

Most of the fishing boats that put out of Surf City lay moored at the docks below

Harbor Drive. Frank parked on a side street that ended at the foot of a wooden pier. It was a dark night. Sea air mingled with faint fish odor, the smell of ships, of tar. A wooden walk followed the wharf. The furtive light of a beer joint spilled through windows, and they could see men inside sitting at tables and lining the bar. The tinkle of a piano reached them.

Laura clung to Frank's arm. "I've lived here most of my life, but I've never been to this part of town."

"They might know something here. Come on."

They entered through swinging doors. Faces turned to them, sailors, fishermen, longshoremen, all dressed in rough work clothes. The few women in the place studied Laura with scowling eyes.

Frank went up to the bar. The bartender, a meaty man, came over. "What's yours, mate?"

"I'm looking for Joe Tanski's boat. Know where I can find it?"

"Well, now, I ain't sure—" He glanced along the bar. "Any you guys know where Tanski's boat's docked?"

"She was in drydock," a heavy voice said. "Changed owners a week or so ago, and the new owner wanted her bottom scraped. They floated her this morning, and she was taking on supplies when I went by. I think she's sailing at midnight."

"What's she called?"

"North Star. She's docked about a quarter mile down the line. Can't miss her. There's a couple shanties along the wharf where she lies."

"Thanks." To the bartender Frank said, "Two whiskies."

Laura pinched his arm. "I've never taken whisky straight."

A man made room for her. "It won't hurt you none, lady."

"Well—" Laura said, and downed the whisky neat. She shuddered a little, and there was laughter. Frank paid, and they went out.

"Well, he was right," Laura said, "it didn't hurt."

They went back to the car and drove down half a dozen blocks. "This should be about it," Frank said.

They spotted the two small shanties at once. Their footsteps were muffled on the thick slanted boards of the wharf. It was low tide, and the line of fishing boats was below them. Hawsers creaked; there was the soft slap of waves. Frank pointed. "There she is."

THIE North Star was one of the larger boats. A great mound of nets lay piled on her stern. Light came from an open companionway beyond.

Laura clung to Frank's arm. "We'll have to take the chance now and call the police."

"You're right. Let's go."

They turned as one. A shadow moved from the deeper shadow of the nearest shanty. Laura gasped as the shadow became a man, and they saw a gun in the man's hand.

"Hold it there," the man said. "I'm pretty good with a gun." He made a cautious half circle past them to the edge of the wharf. His eyes never left them as he gave a low whistle. A moment later, he said softly, "Company coming aboard." He motioned with the gun. "Ladies first. Right here. There's a ladder nailed against the piling."

Laura looked down, hesitated. The man growled, "Come on, come on. This thing in my hand might go off, and it won't make much noise."

Laura went down the ladder, followed by Frank. Two men with guns waited on deck. "Get below," one of them said.

It was a fairly large cabin. Nick Barton lay on a bunk against one wall, his bare feet on a pillow. They appeared red and swollen. A short swarthy man in a pea jacket and black cap sat at a table. Barton raised up on one elbow, a tight grin on his face.

"So you turn out to be just like your wife, curious."

Frank dove across the cabin. He had a hand on Barton when something slammed against his head, and he went down to his knees. He heard a voice—"Good thing I stopped by Sam's for a drink. These two were asking questions. They were just about ready to go after the cops."

The swarthy man said heavily, "This I don't like, Nick. This wasn't in the agreement. So they end up missing, and the cops check. They were asking questions, like Vince says. So when I come back from the trip I'm the one that has to answer the questions."

"Don't worry about it, Tanski. So you never saw them. Who's there to say different?"

"I don't like it," Tanski said sullenly. "Take a guy and unload him in Mexico, all right. Murder I don't like."

"Barton does," Laura said in a high voice. "Ask him! He killed my sister tonight."

Tanski swung on Barton. "You said you got the stuff! You didn't say anything about killing someone to get it!"

"Damn it, don't shout at me!" Barton swung his legs from the bunk. "You didn't kill anyone, and you're getting paid. That's enough." He lowered his voice. "Vince, get up there on the wharf and keep watch, just in case. Red and Jarman should be along in a few minutes. Then we shove off."

Frank said hoarsely, "Let the girl go, Barton. I'll make her swear not to call the police until we're out at sea."

"The hero type," Barton said contemptuously. "She knows too much, Reed. It's your own fault. You're all too damn curious." He grinned. "You know, Reed, you're not very smart. Your wife was a little smarter, but not much. With her it was greed, and it made her a little sharper, that's all."

Frank gave a short laugh. "I can't say you're so smart, either. Who was it caught

up with you, Barton? You got the worst end of that deal, didn't you?"

"Don't get wise, please, for your own good, don't get wise. So I took what they had to give, and they learned nothing."

Barton cocked his head. Low voices sounded on deck. "There are the boys now," Barton said, as a lanky redhead came down the steps. A blonde youngster came next, followed by Vince. Frank noticed that they all had odd expressions on their faces. He saw a fourth pair of legs.

Barton said, "Hey!" He half turned, one hand flashing under his pillow.

"Drop it, Nick!" The man was about forty, heavy, graying. His sawed-off shotgun pointed at Barton. Another man followed behind, a small thin man with dull eyes, with the butt of a cigar in the corner of his mouth, an automatic in his hand.

The graying man looked around. "Too much company. Al, lock all but this guy and the girl in that other cabin. You stay where you are, Barton."

Al lined the men up, checked them swiftly and expertly for guns, then herded them through a forward doorway. Then he leaned back, eyes half closed.

Barton said, "So you caught on, eh, Max? Well, I passed through the fire, and I still lost. That deal still open we talked about the other night?"

"No deal," Max said. He grinned faintly at Frank. "Hello, Mr. Reed."

"Holden," said Frank. "So you're the one who phoned and asked about Barton."

"The same. I didn't expect you to be mixed up in this, though." He looked at Laura. "Who's your friend?"

"My wife's sister. She has nothing to do with this. I've been telling Barton—"

"Barton isn't in charge now," Max said. He grinned at Barton. "Are you? How's the feet? Al's pretty good with a cigar, isn't he? I might let him try a little of the same before we leave you."

"No." Barton's voice was hoarse.

(Continued on page 106)



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J. L. Bouma

(Continued from page 104)

Max chuckled. "This time you'd break, Barton, and you know it." He paused. "Where is it?"

"Under the bunk," Barton said.

"See?" Max said and laughed. "Let's have a look at it, Al."

Al Bent down and pulled a small leather suitcase from under the bunk. "On the table," Max said. "Here, you take buster." He handed Al the shotgun. "I want to see this."

FRANK noticed that the center lock had been broken. Max thumbed the two side catches. He raised the lid. Frank swallowed. He heard Laura gasp. The suitcase was filled with packets of bills, fifties, hundred dollar bills. Max chuckled again. "How much, Nickie? Couple hundred grand?"

"A hundred and fifty thousand. A little less. The girl used about five hundred. Listen, Max—"

"Shut up," Max said flatly. "You could've had a third of this the other night. Now you get nothing. Except maybe the deep freeze. Man," he said softly, "that's real pretty." He grinned at Frank. "And to think you almost got your mitts on this, too."

"That chump didn't even know about it," Barton said.

"No?" Max raised an eyebrow. "You mean this is news to you? Here I thought you come aboard to grab it, you and the dame. Hell, we've been on your heels—" He laughed. "Hear that, Al? They didn't even know."

Max said, "Spill it, Nickie. I want to know what I'm up against. Maybe it'll help you."

"I had the stuff checked at the railroad depot—"

"Yeah, yeah, we didn't figure you'd keep it around the house. So I tore the joint apart and still didn't find anything."

"—And Hope to Die!"

"I had the baggage claim check in an envelope under an abalone shell by the front porch. One place I knew nobody would ever think to look. Al must've kicked it chasing the dog the other night. Anyhow, the chump here found it when he found me unconscious. He put it on the coffee table and went to his place to call the cops. Then his wife runs over, the curious type. She spotted the envelope and looked inside. Something for nothing, I guess is the way she figured. She picked it up later that morning, and I suppose she went half crazy when she saw all that green stuff. She stashed it in a locker at the bus depot, and the next day bought a package tour to Mexico. So I—"

"So you killed her," Laura said.

"By this time I didn't trust the chump or the blonde," Barton continued calmly. "So I tailed him and saw him following his wife. That confused me for a while, and I was especially confused when she caught that Frisco bus. But it worked out."

"Well, now I know a thing or two," Max said. He smiled at the money. "So you knocked her off and came here. It's a good thing Poletti's in jail."

"I was taking care of it for him."

"Yeah. But he trusted you, I'll say that much."

Frank said, "Tony Poletti's money?"

Max grinned. "Was. Smart man, Poletti. He knew Uncle Sam was catching up to him, so he figured it close, but not close enough. He started holding out a long time ago, and the boys at the top caught on. So the axe falls. Tony makes a big show of catching up on his back income tax. So he serves a couple of years. For a hundred and fifty grand he can do it standing on his head, and when he comes out he's got a fat roll."

"Our friend here, the one man he trusted, liked the looks of all that cold cash. So he made the deal with Tanski. Al and I figured that after we traced our friend to this

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town. But at the time the boat was in dry dock, so it didn't add up. Tanski looked to be out of it. Now it fits. A nice trip down the coast. They row our friend ashore. He's got contacts. With a hundred and fifty grand, you can buy contacts. You can even work into the dope racket with a hundred and fifty grand, ain't that right, Nickie?" He looked at Al. "Well—"

Al grinned. He reversed the shotgun, holding it by the short barrel, and stepped up to Barton, who cringed back, his confidence broken. Al's laugh was womanish.

The butt of the gun flashed down. It caught Barton a glancing blow alongside the head. He gave a hoarse cry and curled up on the bunk, his head in his arms. Al smashed the butt down on his spine, and Barton jerked up, his eyes wild. As the butt came down again, he sobbed and grabbed it. Al attempted to jerk it loose.

The shotgun made thunder sound in the cabin.

The charge caught Al square in the chest.

Frank threw himself across the cabin. "Run, Laura!" He swung his fist with all his weight behind it at Max's face, the shock of the blow traveling all the way up to his shoulder, shaking him, and he stumbled over Max as Max fell.

THE door behind him crashed open, and he was caught in a rush of men, all making for the companionway like rats leaving a sinking ship.

There was a shouted command overhead. Lights blazed on the deck. The men crowding the companionway stopped. A harsh voice said, "Keep right on coming!"

Frank followed them on deck. Once he looked back. Barton lay huddled on the cot, crying like a bewildered child who has been spanked for the first time.

There were a couple of portable spotlights on the wharf, a dozen cops, three or four on deck.

Dooling was there, and Laura. "I said

"—And Hope to Die!"

I'd see you around, but at the time I didn't expect it to be here."

Frank said, "Barton is below. Maybe he was smart, but he isn't smart now. My wife—"

"I know about that. She hadn't cleaned out her pocketbook yet, but I suppose she meant to. Her driver's license was all we needed. Mrs. Virginia Reed. We had a tail on Barton, too, in case you don't know. The F.B.I. got interested when they learned he was in town. But we lost him up there around the hotel. Then the local agent came up with Tanski. We found out he was sailing at midnight, so we came down here just in time to see a couple of men throw down on three of Tanski's crew. So it looked to be bigger than we had figured, and we sent for reinforcements, knowing none of them could get away from us." He grinned. "We didn't know you and Miss Dalton were down here. She told me what happened, and I'm certain we can get Barton's signature on a confession." He paused and looked at Tanski who was standing with the others in the glare of the spotlight, their hands behind their heads. "Maybe you were in on it, eh, Tanski?"

"No, I swear! Ask them. I said I wanted no part of murder. Barton did it, and I didn't even know. Ask them!"

"There you are," Dooling said. "You two might as well go—" He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry about your wife."

Laura said, "Take me home, Frank."

They were parked in front of her apartment, and Laura said, "Too much, Frank. Too much at one time. I want to relax and take life easy from now on. I don't want to ever reach for the stars."

He held her against him for a moment, and she did not resist. "In the sun," he said. "Relax in the sun. We can do it, Laura. It might take not come easy, but we can do it."

She nodded, and her hair brushed his cheek, and then he was sure. • • •



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Dennis Wiegand

(Continued from page 89)

pick them up one by one until we've got all of them. Then we'll let this mailman lead us on up the line."

"That's an odd point, by the way," said Hank conversationally. "The only background we have on this guy is that he was a postal clerk for twenty years. Used the job as a cover as well as a means of getting information out of the mails. So he really was a mailman."

"Helps us fix his age, anyhow," added Cothran. "He's at least forty. But he could be a lot older."

"How about it, Benjy," queried Belcher, "you seen any suspicious character around the lobby who looks like he might be an ex-postal clerk?"

"I'm afraid that doesn't mean much," said Cothran. "You didn't think we looked like officers of the law, you know. He might look like banker for all we know."

"Yeah, that's right," conceded Belcher ruefully.

"Hey, I've got an idea," proclaimed Benjy. "Can't do any harm to try it. Maybe take half an hour."

BENJY left five minutes of his half hour unused. He reported back to the house detective's bare little office, breathless with excitement.

"I pinned him down sure enough," he announced. "I was pretty sure he'd show up now, around quittin' time for all the stores and offices. Biggest crowds right now."

"Peak of the crowd makes sense, though," interposed Hank.

"Well, we might as well take a chance," said Cothran. "Which one is it?"

"It's that same old geezer who comes in here every afternoon along about this time. He always sits in that big blue chair in the corner by that big phoney fireplace, reading a paper that has nothing in it but junk about the stock market. Stays

Letter of the Law

about an hour and a half. Looks like he had a lot of reasons for bein' interested in the stock market."

"Let's go, Hank," said Cothran quietly.

"Don't forget, you two," cautioned Hank, "this means our lives and yours, too, more than likely if we don't settle this case as soon as possible. You don't know us when you see us. In fact, you never met us and you don't remember anything that went on here this afternoon. This is more important than most of the front line battles you read about in the newspapers."

Within two weeks Benjy and the house officer had both actually forgotten their brief moment of collaboration and were regarding one another with the old mutual suspicion. So when nearly a month had passed and the house officer summoned Benjy formally to his office, Benjy was certain that at last someone had pinched one of the expensive brass ashtrays and that Belcher intended to sweat him for it.

Cothran and Hank were smiling at him when he entered.

"Well, you certainly put us in a spot, youngster," Hank greeted him.

"Gosh, you mean I fingered the wrong guy? I haven't seen the old boy for two three days now, come to think of it."

"Very much the right guy," laughed Cothran. "But now we're in the soup because we have to make out our report and we don't know how to explain how we got on his trail."

"Some kid with a petty police record tipped us off," quoted Hank in a little-boyish voice. "That'll look sweet in the final report on a very important international espionage case."

"Heck," said Benjy, "that's no worse than what really gave him away. Look. Here it is."

From deep in the tunic of his uniform he brought forth a worn, dog-eared envelope, complete with canceled stamp.

"I fished this up out of a waste basket

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Dennis Wiegand

in one of the writing rooms," he explained, passing the envelope to Cothran. "Then I licked my thumb and smeared it across the name of the guy it was addressed to so that you can hardly make it out."

"I still don't get it," said Belcher.

"It's a cinch. I just went around to each of them stuffed shirts in the lobby and made out like I'd just found it lying around on the floor somewhere and maybe it contained an important message."

"It's empty," accused Belcher, holding the envelope up to his desk light.

"Sure. I'd just hand it to a guy and say, 'Pardon me, sir, but did you just drop this?' Most of 'em would squint at it and maybe haul out their glasses, trying to make out that smear. But this one old geezer I fingered for you, he didn't waste no time. He just takes one quick glance and says, 'Young man, I've never been in Minneapolis.' It's a dead give-away, see?"

"No, I don't," groaned the house detective.

"Well, I'll be . . .," spluttered Hank. "Don't you see the joker? Everybody looks to see if the letter is addressed to him. But a guy who's been a mail clerk for twenty years naturally starts reading an address from the bottom." He didn't even notice that the name was illegible."

"But it's addressed to Minneapolis," protested Belcher, still bewildered.

"Just think it over," advised Cothran sympathetically. "After all, neither Hank nor I figured that one out. In the meanwhile, Benjy, our chief is going to write a letter to the parole officer here that will fix things up, so far as the record is concerned, so that you can get in the Army when the time comes. There'll be another reward, too; but we'll have to go about it quietly. No publicity. But you won't be sorry you gave us a hand."

"Aw, gosh!" said Benjy. "You know," he added thoughtfully, "I think I'll put in for the MP's."

• • •

Toast the Poison Princess!

(Continued from page 68)

"But why did you say you were Dasher?"

"That's easy. As soon as I arrived and rented a furnished apartment, I went to see Dasher. I wanted to know if you'd been there, if he could furnish me with any information before I called here. He said you hadn't. Then, since he had to meet someone, he asked me to stay in the office until he returned. Then you came in—simple?"

She nodded. She said slowly, "Of course, you took all these mad chances for Bob. Not for me. Is he such a great friend of yours?"

"Yes." I said. "There was a night on Jane Russell Knob. And there was a man lying caught on the barbed wire, dying by inches. And there was another fellow—well, *Greater love hath no man*—he didn't lay down his life for me. But that was just plain luck. He was willing to."

"And what about me? When did you decide I wasn't a killer?"

"A couple of hours ago. When you pulled me out of the lake."

"Because I saved your life, you believed I wasn't a murderer? That's not logical."

"Not put that way. You had my confession to the Thorpe murder. If you'd let me drown you were absolutely clear. A killer would have done it."

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"Then," she said, "it's lucky you didn't."

"Yes," I said. "Very lucky."

"When Bob comes back," she said, "the three of us will have fun. You live around here?"

"Nearby," I said. "In Daleton. I'm going back to my old job there."

"What do you do?"

"You've heard of the Arrowhead Country Club? I work there."

"But what do you do?"

I looked at her for a long time. "You won't get sore if I tell you?"

She laughed. And it occurred to me that

it was the first time I had ever heard her laugh. "How could I ever get sore at you again?"

"All right," I said. "You asked for it. I'm afraid that I'm the swimming instructor there."

She glared at me for a moment, then burst into peals of honest laughter. I watched her, aware of an overwhelming desire to kiss her and an overwhelming sense of despair that it was something I could never do. I sighed, went over to the side-board and poured another round of drinks.

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